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STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

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GREG KURZAWA • KEN ALTABEF **INTERVIEWED** CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
PLUS ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK ZONE • FUTURE INTERRUPTED



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CELESTIAL SKYLARKS

In times of social uncertainty and psychological hazard readers need new ideas, new ways of making sense of their world. There's an appetite for prophecy and truthful exploration of the mess we're making, politically, ecologically and economically.

In an interview that will appear in issue #249 (November), sf provocateur John Shirley acknowledges some of his storytelling sets out to challenge and change the perceptions of readers: "Some will say that trying to make a difference in the world through storytelling is not 'pure art'. I would ask those people 'who are you to enslave art to your own detachment from suffering? Who are you to define it to your convenience?'"

On a similar note, Neill Blomkamp, director of *Elysium* and *District 9* recently told the *Guardian*: "If you're not somewhat political or observant, I'm not sure you're an artist ... I'm not actually sure what you're doing."

Frederik Pohl, who died this month, often insisted science fiction is a "literature of ideas that demand discussion". He called for scholarship and criticism to focus on the science, economics, politics of sf, as well the traditional concerns of English Literature.

Pohl had a point, but if the best sf pulls the rug from under lazy preconception and armour-plated complacency it also entertains. Shirley and Blomkamp are masters of style, structure and characterisation as well as prophets. The craft and graft of creating the vision is every bit as vital as the vision.

Recently, in a spirited debate on Facebook, songwriter, musician and artist Bill Nelson wrote passionately in defence of style: "Language, like music, in the service of the imagination sings like a celestial skylark on a heavenly summer's day ... I really don't see any reason to accuse anyone of snobbiness or elitism for trying to encourage a deeper appreciation of the wonder of words."

And, writing in the *Guardian*, critic Philip Hensher highlighted cases in which the silly, trivial and absurd have stood the test of time more effectively than the profound because of the way they sing to us: "What makes a novelist last is the music they make – not their social concern, not the importance of their subjects, not the utterances they make. P.G. Wodehouse has lasted where A.J. Cronin faded."

In sf readers rise to the challenge of complex and challenging fiction by the likes of Christopher Priest, M. John Harrison, Nina Allan and China Miéville because of the way they sing to us.

So Shirley is spot on; Blomkamp is bloody well right; Nelson is nicely on the button, and I'm unable to haggle with Hensher.

When we're reading submissions for *Interzone* we engage with writers' ideas because we're drawn in by their language. That's the siren song that lures us into the hazardous waters of imagination, prophecy and astonishment.

Andy Hedgecock

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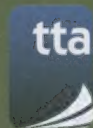
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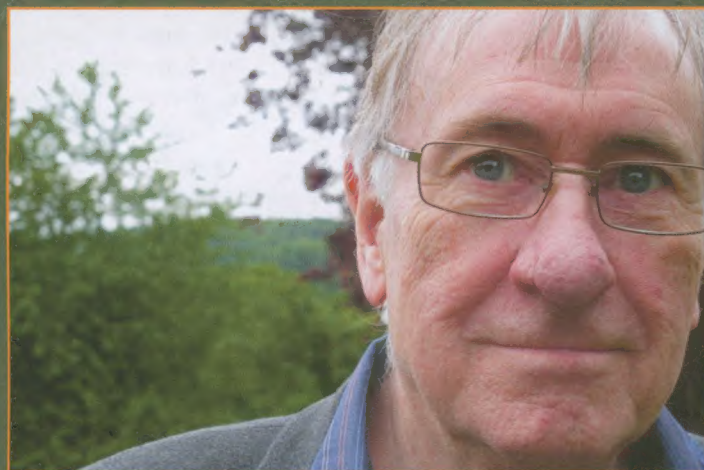
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CHRISTOPHER PRIEST: MAGIC AND ILLUSION

interview conducted by John Howard

INTERFACE



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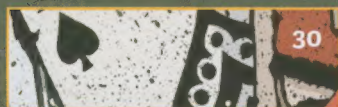
FICTION



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MUTANT POPCORN by NICK LOWE86
films, including Pacific Rim, Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters, Kick-Ass 2, The Wolverine, Monsters University, Planes, The Wall, Elysium, The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones, The World's End



LASER FODDER by TONY LEE92
blu-ray/DVDs, including Defiance, The Host, Blancanieves, Pi, Oblivion, Space Battleship Yamato, Olympus Has Fallen, The Four



DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Hugo Awards. Novel: John Scalzi, *Redshirts*. Novella: Brandon Sanderson, *The Emperor's Soul*. Novelette: Pat Cadigan, 'The Girl-Thing Who Went Out for Sushi' (*Edge of Infinity*). Short: Ken Liu, 'Mono no Aware' (*The Future is Japanese*). Related Work: Brandon Sanderson et al, *Writing Excuses, Season Seven*. Graphic Story: Brian K. Vaughan & Fiona Staples, *Saga, Volume One*. Dramatic – Long: *The Avengers*. Dramatic – Short: *Game of Thrones*: 'Black-water'. Editor – Short: Stanley Schmidt. Editor – Long: Patrick Nielsen Hayden. Pro Artist: John Picacio. Semiprozine: *Clarkes-world*. Fanzine: *SF Signal*. Fancast: *SF Squeecast*. Fan Writer: Tansy Rayner Roberts. Fan Artist: Galen Dara. John W. Campbell Award: Mur Lafferty. • 2015 Worldcon bidding was won by Spokane, WA (narrowly defeating Helsinki); the 2014 event is in London.

Iain Banks has a memorial in space: asteroid 5099 was officially named Iainbanks by the International Astronomical Union, 'and will be referred to as such for as long as Earth Culture may endure.' (Minor Planet Center)

As Others See Us. On the Project Ansible integrated-communications thingy from Siemens: 'The aspect of Ansible that I'd like to highlight is its name, which is some kind of sci-fi reference. You see, Ansible is the machine Lieutenant Uhura used to warn Chewbacca about Voldemort attacking the Tardis. Something like that.' (NoJitter.com)

Neil Blomkamp's film *Elysium* may show all the world's rich people living in space-station luxury while 2154 Earth is a poor folks'

dystopia, but he says firmly: 'It's not science fiction. This is now.' (BBC) Well, *metaphorically*...

Margaret Atwood agrees. Her new book, despite bioterrorism and rampant human genetic engineering, is a far cry from mere sf: 'If I were writing about Planet Xenor, that would be different. It is our world, except with a few twists.' (*Guardian*)

It's the Arts. A UK artist who made a papier-mâché sculpture from dumped comics, including a first edition of *The Avengers*, discovered that he'd transformed their value from £20,000–£50,000 to not very much at all. (BBC)

Peter Capaldi, subject of a recent BBC announcement, was credited in *World War Z* as 'W.H.O. Doctor'. Expect to see this quoted as an example of sf's amazing predictive power.

More Awards. Branford Boase, for both author and editor of a UK novel for children of 7+: Dave Shelton ed. David Fickling, *A Boy and a Bear in a Boat*. • *Children's Book Council of Australia*: Margo Lanagan, *Sea Hearts* aka *The Brides of Rollrock Island*. • *Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery* (neglected authors): Wyman Guin. • *Encore* (second novels): Ned Beaman, *The Teleportation Accident*. • *Mythopoeic* (fantasy). Adult Fiction: Ursula Vernon, *Digger* volumes 1–6. Children's: Sarah Beth Durst, *Vessel*. Scholarship – Inklings: Verlyn Flieger, *Green Suns and Faërie: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien*. Scholarship – Other: Nancy Marie Brown, *Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths*. • *Prometheus* (libertarian): Cory Doctorow, *Pirate Cinema*. • *World*

Fantasy, Life Achievement: Susan Cooper, Tanith Lee. • *Sidewise* (alt-history). Short: Rick Wilber, 'Something Real' (*Asimov's*). Long: C.J. Sansom, *Dominion*.

H.P. Lovecraft, connoisseur of eldritch geometries, is now a square. The city council of Providence, Rhode Island, gave the name H.P. Lovecraft Square to the intersection of Angell Street, where he lived for years, and Prospect Street, home of his doomed character Charles Dexter Ward. (*Providence Journal*)

SFWA announced that an unspecified ('on advice of counsel') member had been expelled from the writers' organisation for unspecified reasons. This was Theodore 'Vox Day' Beale, who had used SFWA's Twitter feed to promote his racist abuse of a black SFWA member (N.K. Jemisin), and who smugly confirmed the expulsion on his website.

As Others See Us II. A *Financial Times* piece on Amazon's Jeff Bezos offers two trivia nuggets, one about packets of vitamins in his socks. 'The only other personal detail about the opaque Mr Bezos is that he likes *Star Trek* – which isn't particularly interesting. A geek who doesn't like *Star Trek* – now, that would be a story.'

Steven Moffat featured in an *Independent* 'Edinburgh Diary' snippet headlined 'The Time Lord's creator...' To show that wasn't a one-off slip, he's also 'Dr Who creator' in the text. Who knew this ageless fellow was on the scene in 1963?

Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells. The BBFC's three most complained-about films of 2012



were *The Woman in Black* remake ('too dark' for its 12A rating), *Men in Black III* ('strong language, violence and sexual innuendo') and, despite 'edits to remove violent battle detail', *The Hunger Games*. (Digital Spy)

Arthur C. Clarke goes to space after all; at least a few scalp hairs will, in a 2014 space-burial launch of 'a giant kite which will sail through space like a galleon on solar winds' – called *Sunjammer* after his 1964 story. Your hair can travel with the great man's for a mere £8000 per (fraction of a) head. (*Independent*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Chef's Special*. 'Gaiety collapsed behind them like a startled soufflé.' (Dave Duncan, *The Hunter's Haunt*, 1995) • *Eyeballs in the Sky*. 'Other visitors were clearly eavesdropping, since they flicked averted eyes at our chairs with the swift, voracious motion of a lizard's tongue.' (Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, 2003) "'Be quiet," Alison Marie whispered, her eyes darting toward the door so quickly that she thought they might tear themselves from their sockets and continue on without her.' (Barbara A. Barnett, 'Memories of Mirrored Worlds', *Daily Science Fiction*, 2013) • *Thog by Gaslight*. 'He looked down at the tiny silver piece. It was a Victorian-era shilling, worth only five pennies in its day.' (Graham Moore, *The Sherlockian*, 2010) • *True Romance*. 'The arrangement of her drawers was far too sophisticated for me.' (Carlos Ruiz Zafon trans Lucia Graves, *The Prisoner of Heaven*, 2011) • *Wild Hair Dept*. 'The tip of his long ponytail peeked out from beneath his cloak like a second penis.' (John Lawson, *The Loathly Lady*, 2013)

R.I.P.

Pamela Boal (1935–2013), UK fan, convention-goer, writer (at early UK Milford workshops) and poet, died on 18 August; she was 78.

John Boyd (Boyd Bradfield Upchurch, 1919–2013), US author whose well-regarded sf debut was *The Last Starship from Earth* (1968) and who published a dozen more novels to 1978, died on 8 June. He was 93.

David Fairbrother-Roe RA, UK artist whose genre work included four striking dragon covers for British editions of Anne McCaffrey's Pern series, died on 21 July.

Mick Farren (1943–2013), UK rock musician and author of two dozen genre books – beginning with the counterculture-steeped and proto-cyberpunk *The Texts of Festival* (1973) and *DNA Cowboys* trilogy – died after a heart attack on stage while performing with his group The Deviants on 27 July. He was 69.

Douglas R. Mason (1918–2013), UK sf author active from 1964 to 1981 under his own name and as John Rankine, died on 8 August; he was 94. As Rankine (his middle name) he was best known for the Dag Fletcher space operas – including his 1964 debut story in John Carnell's *New Writings in SF 1*, and *Interstellar Two-Five* (1966) – and *Space: 1999* spinoffs.

Slawomir Mrozek (1930–2013), Polish absurdist playwright and author whose short satires and fantasies were translated as *The Elephant* (1962) and *The Ugupu*

Bird (1968), died on 15 August; he was 83.

Anne C. Petty (1945–2013), US Tolkien scholar and novelist whose books include *One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology* (1979) and the Faustian fantasy *The Cornerstone* (2013), died on 21 July.

Frederik Pohl (1919–2013), US author, editor, agent and fan: his astonishingly long career ran from 1937 to a blog post on the day of his death, 2 September. Highlights include editing *If* (winning three 1960s Hugos), the classic satire *The Space Merchants* (1953) with Cyril Kornbluth, many memorable shorts such as 'Day Million' and 'The Gold at the Starbow's End', the multi-award-winning *Gateway* (1977) and the 1993 SFWA Grand Master life-achievement honour. His *SF Encyclopedia* bibliography lists 150 books. One of the long-time greats.

J.C. Suares (1942–2013), Egyptian-born US illustrator and graphic designer whose works included *Rocketship: An Incredible Voyage Through Science Fiction and Science Fact* (1977) with Robert Malone, died on 30 July aged 71.

Gilbert Taylor (1914–2013), UK cinematographer who worked on *Dr Strangelove* (1964), *The Avengers* (TV 1966–1969), *The Omen* (1976), *Star Wars* (1977) and *Flash Gordon* (1980), died on 23 August. He was 99.

Snoo Wilson (1948–2013) UK playwright whose satirical sf novels are *Spaceache* (1984) and *Inside Babel* (1985), died on 3 July aged 64.

ILLUSTRATED BY WAYNE HAAG

AD ASTRA

CAROLE JOHNSTONE

We have a lot of sex because it's a way around the things we can't say. The things we can't do. The things we don't want to *think*. We've always been very good at that; even when we hate the very thought of one another, we can still fuck. I used to think that it was because we were that couple: the ones who never forgot how to be horny, the ones who could go to sleep on an argument but never at the expense of a shag. Because we were grown up, emotionally astute. Because we could compartmentalise. Now I realise that none of that was probably ever true. We keep on having sex – as much of it as we possibly can, even when it hurts – because it makes us feel safe, like having a parent stroke our fevered brow through the worst kind of night terror. And because it's a way to fool each other. Maybe even to survive each other. I hope so. Though I don't have a lot of that left.



I get headaches in zero gravity. You'd have thought that I'd have discovered that during all the training and medical assessments inside the Astro labs, or when they sent us sub-orbital for the TV studios. I didn't though, and now those bastards get worse every day I'm trapped here with Rick and nowhere to go. Maybe the pain feels the same way too: we're both stuck inside a smooth, almost spherical prison and escape is nothing but dark vacuum.

Rick and I have pretty much stopped talking. There's nothing and too much to talk about; sex is just about our only method of communication and it's usually angry. I don't talk to Rick because I don't believe anything he says anymore and perhaps because I'm afraid that I might; Rick doesn't talk to me because he doesn't trust himself either – I can see that in his blue-grey eyes though he tries to hide it. He wants to tell me the truth, I can see that. He wants to and he can't. Won't.

Today we have to talk because I awoke to a beeped reminder that it was time for the quarterly biomedical checks. I don't want to do them – no longer even see a reason to – but the alternative is to do nothing at all; to sit and stare into that dark vacuum, and that way madness would truly lie, I'm certain.

Rick is in the medical module already, not that it takes me long to find him. Aside from a tiny cabin that houses little more than a bed, there are only two living spaces in our octahedral capsule: the medical module and a larger area between, dominated by the table that we're supposed to eat our meals at every day. We have no need of a cockpit because our pilots are at least 3.57 billion miles away. At least. To use Rick's increasingly irritating vernacular, we've spent the last thousand days of our lives living in a space the size of a fucking RV.

He's strapped himself into the cycle ergometer, but he isn't doing much cycling; instead, he's slumped over its bars, forehead resting on his arms. I wonder if his head hurts too and feel an uncommon twinge of sympathy.

"Hi."

He jumps, flinches as he looks up as if expecting someone else. "Hey."

"Bio check day."

"Already?"

I try to smile. "Another glorious day in the Corps."

Rick tries to smile back. "That's a good one." He reaches down to release the seat belt across his torso and unstrap his boots from the buckles on the footrests. When he comes towards me, I pretend not to be afraid of him and boot up the computer, busying myself with the equipment.

Every month we both have ECGs and blood pressure checks. I take and then process urinary, blood and respiratory samples; we don't shit very often – and now even less than before – so I've dropped that test entirely. There are complex psychological exams, which is not my domain; we both answer downloaded and detailed questionnaires: always inscrutable, always the same but different. I scoff my way through them, getting angrier and angrier, while Rick chews the inside of his mouth, brow furrowed in concentration.

Every quarter, I carry out more intensive experiments, mostly cardio-respiratory and functional tests with physical, mental and orthostatic loads. That *is* my domain. It's the only real reason for my being here, I guess. Back in the Astro labs, I specialised in immersion theory, more particularly hypokinetic disorders associated with zero gravity: the effects of prolonged weightlessness on the support mechanisms of the body, the central nervous system, motor function, hand-eye co-ordination and so on. There are other things too, a whole plethora of experiments whose potential results were far less alarming when considered only in aseptic theory: the effects of a hypoxic environment on the immune and metabolic systems, due to the fire-resistant argon mixed into our life support systems; the radiobiological effects of solar radiation on the main regulatory body systems; DNA analysis for genome-based prophylaxis and telemedical management. Rick and I take a lot of pills. Neither of us knows what's in them, though I can mostly guess. I don't discuss the test results with Rick, and he never asks. If he did, I wouldn't tell him because he wouldn't want to know.

Rick is chief cook and bottle washer: chief technical officer and chief science officer; I'm chief medical officer and chief communications

officer. That's a lot of chiefs for two people, and the latter has become something of a joke: I record my medical findings and download both that and whatever Rick and I confidentially mutter in our psych exams. I've stopped doing jolly video messages home because I don't think anyone cares. I certainly don't. I have no idea if they reach Earth anyway. The last proper communication was more than eight weeks ago.

Rick reaches for me several times, at first just my hand or my arm as I go about my tests, but then my thighs, my arse, my breasts. This time I bat him away in irritation because today I don't want adolescent oblivion – I don't want to answer his desperation with my own. Rick's looks of reproach grow until I have to give them a response. I think he's depressed; in fact I'm sure he is, but he also has manic bursts of almost uncontrollable excitement that I like even less.

I turn back to the computer screen. "Later," I mutter, even though it's just about the only exercise he gets these days. It's like he's gone into hibernation.

.....
Later, we sit at the table and have dinner together. We haven't done that in a while, even though that was one of the things we agreed to do every day. We both have chicken burgers masquerading as dehydrated and rectangular bars, with those bloody golden arches emblazoned on their wrappers. Even now I can't get used to the texture like squeaky polystyrene: those desiccated strawberries that I used to pluck out of my breakfast cereal because eating them set my teeth on edge. I lob it into the air, watching it turn and twist too slowly.

"You need to eat," Rick mutters, head down and chewing disproportionately fast.

"I'd like to fuck now."

"Okay," Rick says, pretending he can't hear the tremor in my voice. He picks up his wrapper and chases after mine before pushing both into the disposal system. We go back to the cabin. In the beginning, we'd do it anywhere and everywhere, but shagging in zero gravity is frustratingly crap and the bed has the best restraints. I've barely strapped us both in before Rick pulls down my trousers and is inside me. It hurts, not because I'm not ready but because he's been there too

often – and too often like this. We need to stop, I know that. We need to stop because it's becoming a kind of madness. I arch my back and our restraints rattle around us, pulling us back down. Rick swears into my neck, biting. When he comes with a shout that sounds too much like a scream, I do too. It hurts more than it helps. We need to stop. Because if we don't the madness will lose its power to distract. To dissuade.

Just before Rick goes to sleep, his face more relaxed than it's been all day, I lean in close to his ear. "Where are we?"

Rick sighs, opens those grey-blue eyes that never look at me. "You know where we are."

"No, I don't," I whisper, though there's no one else to hear us. Probably. "Do you?"

He doesn't answer me.

.....
Everything is a monumental effort. Every little thing that we do requires so much planning and uses so much energy, yet appears smooth and lazy and unhurried as if we exist in slow motion. It always makes me think of that swan on a lake analogy: existing in zero gravity really is like that, except that the frenzied paddling under the surface is only inside your head.

It takes me an age to release myself from the bed without waking Rick, and by the time I'm free of it I'm almost crying. There's a digital display in the corner of a mounted TV screen – the same TV screen upon which we watched video footage of Rick's daughter's sixth birthday party three months ago; Rick choking, smiling, laughing, rubbing at my crotch even as she blew out her candles – it blinks 03:45. It doesn't much matter whether I believe it or not, I suppose. Here, it's always night. 03:45 is another existence.

I make my way back into the main living area, pulling on the handholds built into the walls until I'm floating close to the only window built into the capsule. I grip at the handles either side, my face pressed hard enough against the aluminium silicate glass to hurt. Rick calls it *aluminum*, which drives me mad. I blow my breath against it; I whisper. *Ad infinitum*.

There's nothing out there. I stare into the black dark just like I do every night, and there's still nothing. I don't see how that's possible. How can I accuse Rick of lying; how can I accuse him of

anything worse than lying when there's nothing out there? If we're where I suspect we are then there shouldn't be nothing – there should be trojans and centaurs and dwarf planets. There should be asteroids and ices and early warning collision alarms. I'm not an astronaut; I'm not even an astrophysicist. I don't know enough to mount any kind of attack never mind a defence, but this is what I know, this is what I feel down to my wasting bones and muscles: we are not going home. Regardless of where we are now – where I *think* we are now – that is the biggest and most irrefutable lie of them all. Rick telling me that we've turned around and are going home.

I crane left, imagining the vast solar sail behind us, mercilessly pushing us forwards. And it is vast. When I saw 3D simulations of our ship in flight, our octahedral capsule looked like a little blemish – an imperfection – surrounded by brilliant, golden mirrors reflecting the sun. According to the manual, our solar sail has a surface area of 600,000 square metres. Rick must have told me about 600,000 times that this is the size of ten square blocks in New York City. We never got to see it in the flesh because it was unfurled from our cargo bay once we'd left orbit, but in darker moments I imagine its brilliant face turned and tacked by unseen hands, reflecting photons like balls bounced off a wall, propelling us further and further away from their thrower.

I sit down at the table again and strap myself in. I've stopped crying already because crying in zero gravity is a horrible experience – another reminder that my body is not my own anymore. I look at the walls surrounding the dubious relief of the window. They're lined with black bags and I'm sick of seeing them; they are another example of theory being a better beast than practice. In the beginning, those polythene bags were filled with water and food: a nuclei-rich, half metre thick shield against radiation that was more effective than even metal or the vast water tanks between the living modules and the storage bays.

As we used them up, Rick switched them with bags of our collected shit. The capsule's water recycling system dehydrates them by osmosis, leaving hydrocarbon-rich waste behind. All very clever, of course. But now there's no escaping the

fact that there is more dried shit lining our living room walls than there is food or water. And there's no escaping the fact that we breathe recycled air and drink recycled water that was once what our bodies expelled – what they no longer wanted. Everything is used up and then used up again. Nothing goes to waste. It makes me want to scream. Ad infinitum is not an option here, but sometimes it doesn't feel that way at all.

I ball my hands into little fists and hiss other words under my breath: *ad hoc*, *ad nauseam*; I have no idea why, which is probably just as well because they make me feel better. If I allow myself to think of the black bags and the water shield tanks behind them and then the three metre wide storage corridor encircling our living space behind *them*, I might scream and never stop. Even though Rick laughs at most of my Alien movies references, that's the one he knows I'll never use. Because it's true. In space, no one can hear you scream. No one that can help you, at least. No one that wants to.

They isolated us – all twenty-some candidates – for twelve months inside a terrarium called Biosphere #3, just outside Tucson, Arizona. It was before all the TV companies came on board, so it was half-arsed at best. We could come and go as we pleased – although there was nowhere to go, there were plenty deliveries, plenty parties in the desert. Rick got more out of it than me, because he was on the Infinity astronaut program and I was only another lab tech, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the experience. It was nothing like this because it was no preparation for this. And because we were so far down the list of potential candidates that we didn't even need to pretend that it might be.

They wanted a couple. A married couple. Ostensibly because of the confinement to such close quarters and the length of time of the expedition: two and a half years to our destination and about the same back again, but also because of the symbolism. Rick and I represent humanity: the Adam and Eve of a new era. Only I'm not the one who tempted him with the apple, I'm pretty certain of that.

I hadn't liked the favourites. Experienced astronauts, as arrogant as they were foregone con-

clusions; I've forgotten their names. I'd laughed when they were pulled because they'd got stuck on the US-SS and couldn't get back in time to launch. Bill and Stella Flack were their initial replacements: the chief technical officer of the project and his physicist wife. She got pregnant at the eleventh hour, and remembering his blustering swagger aboard Biosphere #3, I imagine that he was pissed to say the least. There were others, of course, lots of them. I stopped laughing around the time I realised that the candidates were dwindling to an alarmingly low number. I cried the night that Rick's bleep went off; I cried harder when I watched him crouched over the kitchen counter, phone in hand, his too-white teeth getting bigger.

Space exploration is now exclusively the domain of entrepreneurs and private enterprise. Our expedition has been funded by rap stars and millionaires and TV execs and ex-engineers still greedy for what was denied them in their government careers. The rest of it is advertising and television rights. After we were signed up, we spent more time talking to dicks in shiny suits standing in front of cameras and sound booms than we did training in the Astro labs or the space centre itself.

I remember watching one online interview with the deputy director of Astro Infinity a few weeks before the launch date. When asked about the not inconsiderable risk, he'd waxed lyrical about why it was a risk worth taking: that it harkened back to the days when taking risks to further humanity's knowledge was commonplace; that our expedition was Meaningful. Inspirational. The interviewer's next question had been whether or not he expected us to have sex in transit. That answer got far more hits. And that was the last night that I begged Rick to reconsider, to forfeit our contract, sell the house, pay the fine – anything. He didn't even bother to say no.

I am the weakest link, of course. I'm a lab tech, a grunt, a non-entity. And I'm not American. Rick is a mediocre astronaut, rejected by government programs, and until now a sailor of not even the closest stars, but he's the All American Jock that the TV studios love to love, and back when I was a struggling student, I mod-

elled underwear online. There were posters of us everywhere, dedicated websites and adzines and pop-ups and cookies. I was almost glad when the launch day came around just so I could escape. Stupid.

I wake up still strapped to my chair. Rick knocks his arm against me as he comes around the table's edge, handing me another rectangular bar. I don't say thank you because he doesn't say anything about me not waking up in bed with him; about spending an entire night sat at a table. I chew the bar – it tastes of synthetic apple – and drink my water. Rick avoids my eyes, though I don't try very hard to meet his. My fear is alive now, bubbling under the surface like magma, reminding me of what we've long left behind.

Rick picks up the remains of our rubbish and disposes of it before kissing me on the cheek. He grabs my left tit and flashes his white teeth. "No offence."

I try on a far weaker smile that pulls tight my skin. "Look into my eye."

"See ya later, honey." As if he's going to the office via the subway or Route 25, instead of coasting less than three feet to his computer station, next to the clearspan floor deck; as if we didn't have to catch the escape of someone's blood post-orgasm where it floated in an ugly, perfect sphere towards the capsule ceiling the night before.

"*Carpe diem*," I mutter, grinding my teeth. I need to pee, but I hate using the toilet – as much for the effort as the inevitable sample results (a constant flux of galactic cosmic rays has caused tracks of radiation damage in our biological tissues, altering our DNA and lowering our blood cell counts; we're already long past the three percentage points expected over an astronaut's entire career – so I pretend that I don't. Instead, I push past Rick and his studiously faked industry and then into the smaller medical module.

I don't look at the collated data, nor do I attempt to send it, even though I should have already done so days before. I'm no longer afraid of what that data shows because there's little point, but I'll be buggered if I let them see what they've done to us – even if I suspect that they already know.

There's a laminated A4 page tacked above my computer, a joke that Rick thought might make things better 2.7 years ago:

LENA'S SHIT LIST

GCRs

SEPs

Zero Gravity

Rationing

Re-entry

Her Fuck-buddy

I grab hold of the cycle ergometer, spin myself around onto its saddle and strap myself in. It's only once I've started exercising that I remember to be more angry than afraid. Rick used to make a lot of jokes about re-entry. A lot. They were only funny while I believed it was still a possibility. While we both did. Now it's just another thing that we don't talk about.

It was good at first – aren't most things? We've long left the rocky planets and gas giants behind, but I can still remember the moment we bypassed Jupiter, its pull tremendous enough to slow us to a brief crawl. I remember Rick and I clutching hands as we hung onto the handles either side of the viewing window, watching the white upwelling bands and red downwelling bands, laughing at the tiny black shadow of Europa, trying to find the undulating Great Red Spot; the latter a game that never got old: Spot the Spot. We never did.

After Jupiter, our acceleration began increasing, our continuous thrust gaining a momentum far beyond what we'd been led to expect. I'd wondered a little about that – about the laser beams that had been under development in the Astro labs and how they could supplement the sun's dwindling power at increasing distances. There had been no point asking Rick; he knew as much as me and resented it a lot more.

I start to cry again as my wasted legs pump back and forth, their weakness trembling up into my pelvis.

Ipsa facto, caveat emptor. Memento mori.

I loved him. I love him. And I'm scared. When I let myself think; when I let myself *know*, those are the only two things left. We reached Pluto over two months ago. Astro wanted to assess the

contracture of its atmosphere: it's getting further and further from the sun and yet its atmosphere appears to be getting thicker, bigger. It's one of the few remaining mysteries of our solar system, but neither Rick nor I have grown any wiser in that regard: all data was collected via telescopes and particle spectrometers; we didn't have to do anything at all.

Finally reaching Pluto was an anticlimax, partly because it wasn't Jupiter and mostly because I had a stomach upset that confined me to the cabin for most of the flyby. If you've never puked in zero gravity, if you've never had to wear an adult nappy because you physically can't strap yourself onto a toilet and aim at a point narrower than a bulls-eye, you can't begin to empathise. By the time I could think beyond any of it, our destination had been reached and we were already going back home, our sail turned and tacked towards the sun. Or so I'd thought.

My thighs shake and shake until I finally stop, my fingers curling against my chest, touching my heartbeat. I can feel my fury dissipating like a coastal fog. I need to feel like there's still something I can do; I need something to happen.

And then it does. There's a gentle hum – no more than that – and then the alarms start going off, flashing fast red. Rick shouts, sounding more alive than he has done for weeks, months.

And I think, is this it? Have we got a collision alarm? Will we see an ice, a short-period comet? Will I finally be able to say *see? I knew we weren't going back, I fucking knew it!?* But as I manage to get free, I hear the servomotor start up and realise that the capsule is turning with the sail in a manoeuvre that was practiced again and again in pilot simulations, and that the alarms are those that warn not of collision but of radiation, which can only mean one thing. A solar flare.

My disappointment is so great that it seems to weigh me down. In the end, Rick is forced to come to the medical module to get me. His face is the colour of ash, his jaw working as if he's grinding his teeth. I'd forgotten that he could look this way; that he was capable of anything beyond a flat and distant stare.

"Lena, come on! They're turning the ship!"

We collide in an ugly embrace, and then he manages to turn us around. We drift through

the living area towards our cabin, alarms sounding and flashing all around us, the servomotor humming, and I start to laugh, I can't help it – an ugly sound pitched far too high. When we reach the cabin, Rick pushes us towards its furthest wall, and there we hunker down where we're best shielded from the outside, using the bed's restraints to keep us there.

"Close your eyes, baby," Rick says, and I give him a sharp stare, wondering if he's being cruel, wondering if he's turning one of my few remaining defences against me. But he only looks afraid, he only looks concerned. And so I do.

A week after the solar flare, I take more samples from us both and feed the results into the med computer. It'll take a few hours to properly process our readings against the Rhesus macaque prediction model, not that there's anything I can do if the results are bad. We're not dead and we don't have acute radiation sickness, so I guess the worst we can hope for is reduction of our overall immune system resistance. I'm beginning to suspect that our long-term life expectancy is academic. It's ironic, I suppose, that it's our very distance from home that has probably saved us, but I can't bring myself to feel grateful about that.

We knew the risks, Rick keeps telling me, his blank game face having survived intact. And he's right, of course. They told us that we had at least a twenty percent chance of experiencing a fatal SEP event and nearly a fifty percent chance of experiencing the kind of flare that would kill fifty percent of us in fifty days. I remember Rick laughing at that one: "Wonder which one of us will be the fifty percent?" I'm also pretty certain that there's been some damage to the ship; there are still occasional alarms and Rick spends much of his time hunched over his computer, looking at endless streams of data. I don't understand most of it – not that Rick likes me to look at all, though I know the password – but what I do understand I don't like.

"We're not slowing down."

Rick doesn't look up from the table, doesn't answer, just goes on chewing his bloody dinner like he's enjoying it.

"Rick, we're not slowing down and even I

know that we should be. The photons' pressure on the sails should be working against us now, but they're not. If anything, we're going faster." My voice drops to a whisper that nearly acknowledges how shit scared I am; that nearly lets me imagine our tiny capsule hurtling into black, starless oblivion. When Rick doesn't even stop chewing, I scream high and loud, hard enough to hurt my throat. "We're going fucking faster!"

Rick swallows, and then silently plucks my uneaten bar from my hands. "Are you gonna eat that, sweetcheeks?"

I swallow my fear, I swallow my fury, and the effort is so great that I can't answer him. After a mute second, he unwraps it and starts to eat.

"Where are we, Rick?" I'm a biologist and a mathematician. I have two PhDs and my research into hypokinetic and metabolic disorders associated with prolonged zero gravity had Astro Infinity offer me first a five and then six figure salary ten years ago, but all of my work was theoretical, the minutiae of space travel – not sailing ships and solar flares and walls of my own crap. Never once during those ten years spent in the Astro labs was I afraid of them – those men with no faces in boardroom suits. Not once did it occur to me that they would lie. They told Rick that this was his only chance and they told him that I was part of the deal, and I spent so long trying to get out of going, trying to convince Rick that it was a bad idea that I never once stopped to consider the offer itself. Why us. *Non compos mentos*.

"We're in the Kuiper Belt, aren't we?"

Rick chews, chews, chews.

"Please, Rick, just tell me." My fingers pull into tight, white fists. "I already know we are, so just fucking tell me. We never turned around at all, did we?"

Rick looks at me with his grey-blue eyes. "I've sent them a message."

My heart momentarily stills. "You have?"

He nods, offering me the kind of smile that used to make everything better, but before I can ask him what was in the message, what he asked them, what he hopefully *demand*ed of them, his smile grows teeth and he leans closer across the table. "But if I were you, baby doll, I'd be more worried about the things in the walls."

My heart stutters, stalls, stutters again. I think the word *what*, but I don't say it because I'm suddenly more afraid of Rick than I am of men with no faces in boardroom suits or even of where we are.

He winks, unstraps himself from the table and then deposits his empty wrappers inside the disposal system. "We're in the pipe, five by five."

I shudder as he drifts past me on the way to our cabin. He chuckles, but I notice him cast a quick glance like a tic towards the storage hatch, his forehead briefly furrowing. When he looks back at me, his smile has teeth again. "Ready when you are, sweetcheeks. Boy, are you gonna be sore tomorrow."

The bile rushes into my throat as he disappears from view. I'm shaking, shaking, but as all my attention is focussed on not being sick, I hardly notice. When the worst of it passes, I unstrap myself and get up. I pull my body towards the viewing window because I can't bear the thought of being near this Rick, of letting him touch me and fuck me, of letting him make me pretend along with him.

I grasp hold of the handles and I stare out at that dark nothing. But this time I let myself see. I let myself picture the framed and beautiful artistic impression of what lies beyond the planets on the periphery of our solar system that we had hanging behind our corner sofa: those coloured, speckled spheres. Green dots in the main belt, orange specks for those objects scattered, yellow and pink trojans, white centaurs. I look and I look and all I see is nothing. Not that it matters; I know that they're there.

I wake up in the dead of night – in the dead of what is night more than 3.57 billion miles away – to a realisation that is so obvious I can hardly believe that I'd never even thought of it before. I'm strapped into my seat at the living room table, so only my hands are free to move without hindrance. They creep over my mouth.

At the press conference a few weeks before the launch, those boardroom suits made us out to be pioneers, explorers into the furthest reaches of our own solar system. We posed holding hands, wearing our astronaut suits and clutching our helmets under our arms while flashes went off

all around us, and it never once occurred to me that I wasn't what they said I was – not once. I'm not an astronaut. And neither is Rick, no matter what it says in his job description. I don't know how much this expedition cost, how much it is still costing, but I know that it's too much to rely on the few skills of candidates so far down a list that they were close to its bottom.

My fingers pull at my lips, my gums. My fingernails glance against my teeth. We are not the astronauts, the pioneers. We don't pilot; we don't discover; we don't interpret. We exist. We collect and collate physiological and biological and psychological data on our own body systems, we survive the onslaught of GCRs and SEPs and road test new systems of shielding, communication, junk food. We are guinea pigs, Rhesus monkeys. The domestiques for the true stars, the ones who might come after. All going well. And just like the lab macaques, once we've outlived our usefulness we're expendable – but never without one last great hurrah. Nothing is used up; nothing goes to waste. I think of those astronauts in Biosphere #3. I think of Bill Flack's arrogant swagger. Rick and I were always the ones who were going. I think of those parties in the desert, the faked camaraderie, the cocktails and backslaps. I look at the black beyond that aluminium silicate window. And now we'll just keep going. On and on and on. Until we don't.

Rick barely speaks to me at all now. He eats and he drinks and he pees and he occasionally shits, and the rest of the time he sits at his computer next to the clearspan deck and he looks. More occasionally still, he types.

I've stopped asking him where we are because I suspect that he no longer knows. I've stopped allowing myself to be afraid because it's too much to bear every second of every day. I've stopped looking out of that aluminium silicate window, I've stopped making references to the Alien movies, I've stopped thinking or muttering Latin phrases in common usage. I've completely stopped sending back data via the med computer. It feels like the only weapon I have left. Instead, I type an endless stream of profanities and curses, and if the weight of their efficacy is measured in fury – in desire – then they

should worry the suits with no faces far more than any lapse in proper communication.

We still have dinner together; that seems to be the only habit that neither of us can break. I don't know how much food is left. I don't dwell too long upon which might be the worst death: starvation or suffocation, because I guess it hardly matters. We no longer fuck – we no longer fuck *often* – and Rick's distant blank gaze no longer frightens me as much as it once did. I think he's mad, but that's okay. I'm nearly jealous, though I'm not so certain that I'm not far behind him.

"I've been thinking about when we first met," I say to him one mealtime, as he's bent over and furiously chewing. "Do you remember?"

He shakes his head and keeps on chewing. The dark hair at his crown has started to thin. His hair was one of the first things that I noticed about him, that and his thick forearms, his sexy grin, his ludicrously Goodfellas accent. We met at an Astro Infinity Christmas dance, and when he bought me a caipirinha and told me that he was in the astronaut program, I decided that if he asked me back to his I'd go. He did.

"Why did you buy me a drink?" I whisper. "Why did you ask me to dance?" I know why. He'd said it was because I'd glowed under the white disco lights like no one else; he'd said it was because I'd turned away from another man and smiled at him across the clichéd crowded room and he'd known. In a smiled, glowing breath, he'd known.

He looks up from his labours and flashes a grin that shows more teeth than it used to. His receding gums are red, pumped full of blood. "Because ya made my dick sing, baby doll."

There's no longer any emotion in his words, no smiled intent. I shiver. I shiver again when his head snaps left, looking up at the crap-lined walls as though he's heard something. He does that a lot now – like a cat who's sensed something that you haven't; that you can't – but it never loses its power to freak me out. It's just about the only thing left that does.

He shakes his head as if convincing himself that he's mistaken, that all is well. He unstraps himself from the table and plucks my half-eaten bar from my hand. I think *we're in the pipe, five*

by five, as he deposits the wrappers inside the disposal system.

I'm suddenly seized with that need to do something again; that need to reassert a control that has all but vanished. "Rick – "

He turns back around to me slowly, rubbing at his flat crotch. "Just thinking about you gets me hard, baby."

This time, I don't feel sick. This time, I don't feel anything at all. Once, I might have believed him, but not now. Thinking about what might happen to us gets him hard. Thinking about going further than anyone has ever gone before gets him hard. Discovering the undiscovered. The fear, the power, the powerlessness. Starvation, suffocation, oblivion. That's what gets him hard.

And that's when I know for sure. We won't survive each other. We won't.

"Don't speak to me anymore." I whisper it.

He laughs as he heads for his cabin, but I don't look at his eyes because I'm too afraid of what I might not see. This is Astro Infinity's symbol of humanity; the Adam and Eve of a new era. This is what we've been reduced to.

I flinch from Rick's sudden scream – languid terror versus something far more immediate. And requiring a response. When I look left, towards him, his head is cocked again towards the storage hatch, the one that leads behind the water walls.

"Can't you hear it?" he screeches, but I don't think that he's asking me. When he pulls himself towards the ladder, I don't unstrap myself; I don't try to stop him with either words or deed. A cringing, hunkered down part of me flinches as he climbs the ladder, as he opens the hatch. When his torso and then legs disappear upwards into new space, I do unanchor myself, grabbing hold of the table's edge as I try to get closer.

I hear him curse, I hear him bang his body against the three metre wide storage space that surrounds our own. And then suddenly I'm grabbing onto any and all handholds, desperate to reach the ladder. I climb it with shaking limbs; I bash my left temple against the opened hatch as I crane inside.

Rick is on all fours, already close to the turn towards the medical module. He spins slowly

around, the skin on his face thin enough to expose the grey veins beneath its surface, his smile a frozen rictus. "Can't you hear it? Can't you hear *them*?" His eyes widen in almost ecstatic terror. "They're in here!"

I step down one rung and grab hold of the hatch. He sees me doing it, and then sees what it means. His scream is too late. His weightless scuttle back towards me is too late. I pull down the hatch and turn its wheel. I've already almost reached the bottom again when he begins pounding at it. When he begins screaming. But it's too late for that too. I've already decided not to hear him.

I can sleep in my own bed again. The novelty wears off within days, but while it prevails, it is wonderful. I sleep. I don't dream. I'm not sore. I'm not desperate. I'm nothing at all.

My days are spent listlessly drifting between cabin, living space and medical module. For the first few of these, I can still hear Rick banging against the storage corridor walls and hatch. I start feeling the insidious scratch of doubt behind my eyes, until I sit myself at his computer station and type in his password. I might not be able to understand most of the data, but I know that I'll understand some of it – and despite

everything, I still need to know. I need to know what – if anything – they're going to do.

It doesn't work. Rick was never supposed to tell me his password, just as he never knew mine, but after an early blow job less than two weeks into our journey, he told me that it was the date of our wedding. It isn't anymore. And that's when I know what the me that locked the storage hatch already knew. Rick was part of it. Rick was always part of it. Rick and his stubborn, never satisfied hard-on. His endless *need* to be something other than what he was.

I release myself from his station and drift towards the table. I look up at the white curved ceiling and the dimpled dents of the surrounding water walls. I scream. I finally scream.

"Sweetcheeks, Baby doll, Rout, Erb, Aloo-minum, Moss-cow, Dick Wad!" I stop, pulling myself up short against the viewing window, and my eyes follow the frantic scuttle that I'd been ignoring for days. "Eye-fucking-Rack!"

The words are a better balm than Latin phrases or Alien movie references; they make my heart temporarily sing. Afterwards, I sleep without strapping myself down. I float.

All the days and moments and thoughts – such as they are – morph into one another, until I can

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hardly tell what time has passed. I've turned off the monitors that blink time, the computers that tell me how much life support is left. I no longer eat.

Instead, I stare out of the viewing window into black nothing. Sometimes I forget to blink. And now there really is an Alien – a thing – inside the walls. Using the capsule as a hamster wheel, I hear it. Banging. Scuttling. Shrieking. It doesn't lose strength as I'd expected; it doesn't grow quieter or any more resigned to its fate.

And then finally – one day/one night – it happens. What I've been waiting so long for. I see something. Finally, through that blank vast window, I see something.

My jaw slackens and my heart remembers what it's for. I feel colours wash over me – not the greens and oranges and yellows and pinks of that framed picture behind our corner sofa – but real colours, real light. Real breath, real life, real horror, real joy. I understand Rick's ecstatic terror a little better. I'm crying, but I can't feel it. I'm shaking, but it doesn't matter. I'm dying, but I don't care.

Finally, I know. I see. Finally.

I remember the apple; I remember being young and stupid and reading aloud from behind an echoing lectern. *For God knows that*

when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. It's not true. It's just more lies.

I giggle and it hurts my raw throat. "Don't ask me, man. I just work here."

I reluctantly turn from the window and pull myself into the medical module. There's no need to enter my password because I never logged out. I type just two short sentences and I'm still crying, still shaking, still giggling as I do it.

You will never see what I see. You will never know what I know.

I shout them too. I shout them loud enough for the alien still beating its chitinous wings inside the walls to hear – and it does. I know it does because it screams back.

And that's okay. I smile and I close my swollen eyes against the brilliant, unending light.

That's okay.

Carole's previous story for *Interzone*, 'God of the Gaps' (#238), was selected (along with five other stories published here) for *Best British Fantasy 2013*. She is a regular contributor to our sister magazine *Black Static*. Her debut short story collection, *The Bright Day is Done*, is coming very soon from Gray Friar Press, and her novella *Cold Turkey* will be the next release in our TTA Novella series. She can be found online at carolejohnstone.com.



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illustrated by **RICHARD WAGNER**

THE HARETON K-12 COUNTY SCHOOL AND ADULT EXTENSION

story by **JAMES VAN PELT**

The new building perched on a rocky hill west of town on land no farmer could tease a crop from, so the town donated the property to the school district. Local contractors volunteered their laborers to construct the school, and that first September, when the school threw wide its doors, children had to climb four sets of stairs, fifty-five steps each, from the student drop-off area at the foot of the hill.



On opening day, some children jumped from horse-drawn buggies. Some came in shiny Model-T Fords, but most walked from town, their empty book bags in one hand, and heavy lunch buckets in the other.

Inside the school, inside the ten freshly painted classrooms, by the lovingly buffed wooden desks with storage space beneath their as yet unmarked surfaces, waited the new teachers, all recent graduates from teaching colleges, although at the time they called them "normal" schools. The school board had decided the new teachers should be unburdened with previous experience. Only the principal, Theodore Hareton, was a veteran educator. He greeted each child at the door, shook each hand solemnly, from the tiniest five-year-old to the hulking eighteen-year-old farmers' sons who would already be tired from their morning chores, whose fingers were work-roughened and who when they wrote gripped their pencils with unfamiliarity.

Theodore Hareton signaled his secretary to ring the bell to start the first day after the last child paused at the door, a little breathless. A third-grader, thought Hareton, or a small fourth grader. The girl's short brown pigtails stuck almost horizontally from her head, and her brand new pink ribbons sheened in the sun.

"Welcome to school," said Hareton. "Listen to your teachers."

"Thank you, sir."

When she went inside, Hareton looked out over the town below his feet. Two rabbits hopped out from under a bush beside the stairs, wiggled their noses at him, and vanished beneath the bushes on the other side.

Hareton took a full breath, put his hands together behind his back, and entered the building.

Thirty-two years passed before Theodore Hareton retired. They renamed the school after him. The community college used the classrooms in the evening to accommodate soldiers using the G.I. Bill after returning from the war.

The community had grown too. The school no longer sat at the edge of town. New neighborhoods had sprung up on all sides. The school district passed a bond issue to fund a long auto ramp on the hill's least steep side so busses and

cars could now park right beside the school and its new entrance, although children who walked still climbed the cracked cement stairs to what had once been the front doors.

New wings with classrooms and a larger gymnasium had been added. Bleachers were improved next to the football field. School Hill, as the locals called it, was broad, a wide expanse of grass, scrub oak, and crumbling limestone elbows and knees punctuated the surface, but they made additions to the building as if they had no room to spread out. They excavated space for new classrooms below the ground, and they added stories to the old school. Reluctantly, it seemed, new wings were added. Construction always burrowed first, then piled on later. New structures cannibalized old; new blueprints overlaid the original ones; hundreds of contractors over the years refurbished, built on, redesigned, and modified the building until it became a stylistic hodgepodge where hallways led into hallways that emptied out into enclosed courtyards or administrative offices or storage areas even long-time students didn't recognize. Eventually they added a new wing, and then another and another and another, but always they dug first so basements rested atop subbasements, and second stories existed below third and fourth floors.

Principal Pesto, who stayed in the position for two years, famously grumbled, "They should have hired an architect when they designed this monstrosity." He also suggested the best way to improve the school would be to burn it down, but his was a minority opinion. Teachers within the county clambered to be transferred to the Hareton school, and most teachers who took a position there stayed until they retired. Many teachers were alumni.

Principal Millhauser took over from Pesto and oversaw the school's most ambitious expansion. He had been assistant curator at the famous Barnum Museum before moving to Hareton, and it was Millhauser who approved many of the school's most radical features, including the minarets, the flying buttresses, the covered walkways, fanciful bridges, the hanging garden, the numerous spiral staircases, the functional follies connected to the school via tunnels and serving

as isolated reading rooms, the butterfly pavilion, and other expansions too varied to mention.

As the school grew, its uses became shared between several organizations. The hospital donated a walk-in clinic because the school end of town was too far from medical facilities. The recreation district paid for a pool, the first handball courts and weight rooms rather than build a separate recreation center. The arts council raised funds for a community theater for plays and concerts. The police department added an annex for public service, as did the motor vehicle department. Social Services equipped a day care for the unfortunate students who became parents before graduation, but it also took the faculty's children.

Always, earth moving equipment, fenced off construction areas, and men with hardhats were a part of the campus.

During the time of fear after the Second World War, the civil service added underground living quarters and bomb shelters, thick-walled rooms with cots and shelves stacked with water and canned goods. When the fear faded, janitors used the bomb shelters to store cleaning equipment. They played music on the old radios to entertain themselves when they took breaks.

Coach DeMarco was the first teacher to live on campus. His wife left him for their stock broker, but she kept the house. DeMarco finished his math classes each day, ran afternoon practice for football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. Each evening, after he'd checked the locker rooms, gathered wet towels to put in the canvas bin, he'd walk through the empty building to the cafeteria where the cooks would have left him something. He'd carry the meal with him to the small room he'd taken that once had been considered as a refuge from the outside world, contemplate his lesson plans for the next day while eating, and then would go to sleep deep within the school's bowels.

Like all schools, Hareton could be a safe island away from the outside. A Bosnian Serb assassinated an Austrian duke and his wife on a Sunday. On Monday, the Ladies Quilters Society held their weekly meeting in the Home Ec room the way they had the Monday before, and the

way they would until they disbanded nine years later because Madeline Shattner thought Betsy Habler had stolen her diamond center Amish pattern variation.

When the stock market collapsed on Black Monday, 4th grade math classes struggled with multiplication tables. Coach Persigo tested his classes on the rope climbs the P.E. department recently installed, and the cheerleaders worked on a new cheer one girl had seen at Boston College where she'd been visiting her aunt (at the time, they referred to themselves as "yell leaders").

On another Monday, after a Japanese surprise attack on the American navy at Pearl Harbor, Mr Carr introduced his biology class to the frogs they would be dissecting on Tuesday. Senior class vice president, Cynthia Taddler swore she would never touch the dead, nasty thing, but her twin sister Donna looked forward to the experience and spent Monday evening carefully cutting open apples so she could make a clean incision the next day.

During the Afghan Virus Crisis, when Europe lost 1.4 million, the county cleared the cleaning equipment and stored desks from the old bomb shelters, and for two weeks in that fearful May, hundreds of citizens waited for news the plague had reached their shores. But even then, Mrs Cross met with her ninth graders to discuss *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and Mrs Freeman showed her videos of her summer trip to north Africa to her World Geography class.

On any given day, students may have suffered disasters at home: illnesses, beatings, broken marriages, poor food (or none), or a host of other possibilities, but when they came to class the expectation was their homework was done and they would pay close attention to their lessons.

From the very beginning, school separated itself from the "real" world, whatever that was. School might be artificial, but failures can always be made up. Falling short was expected. Professionals worked to raise people up. School is about first and second and third chances. If you are not the champion, you can be the most improved. If you are not the hardest worker, you are still a snowflake, unique and valued.

Unlike the real world, safety nets fill the school. It doesn't always work this way, but the bullies are the villains, not the victors, and the teachers are not bosses who are trying to fail you. In theory, and frequently in practice, everyone is loved. Everyone is supported, and the goal is that everyone succeeds.

The town accorded Hareton graduates a kind of status. Some took to calling it "the academy". On many doctors' walls and plumbers' and gardeners' and the morticians' a Hareton K-12 diploma proudly hung. Hareton graduates were more likely to do business with other Hareton graduates. Old timers wore their Hareton letter jackets – with the letter removed, although no matter how old and faded the jacket, the slightly darker purple where the "H" had resided showed through.

Even though the 12th graders burst with eagerness to start their lives after they finished at Hareton, and they often left town for far away colleges, they joked the "Hareton curse" would bring them back to the school for homecoming. The local superstition maintained the way to break the curse was to take a jar of dirt from the football field and sprinkle it around their house in the new town.

From its first days, Hareton became the town's center. When the wrestling team went to state, which it did year after year, a caravan followed the team bus to the state capitol, where they held the tournament. Stores would close, and hand-lettered signs in the windows said "Gone to State". Everyone understood.

Later, when television and computers and video games took hold, and more kids worked after school jobs, the caravans grew much smaller. Still, the packed football stadium turned away fans for important home games, and basketball crowds stamped their feet so hard in enthusiasm that the stands had to be reinforced.

No matter where one stood in town, on the library steps, in front of Jake's Auto Repair, in the little park with the pink gazebo by the bicycle shop, in the alley where Christy Archer shot her mother on the day before V.E. Day, from any spot in the Catholic Cemetery (and the Odd Fellows one too), one could see Hareton on top the hill.

In the most deeply buried janitor's closet, hidden away by baffling turns and easy to forget stairwells, existed the blueprint room. In it, two huge cabinets with wide shallow drawers held the school's schematics. Electricians, plumbers, computer technicians, structural engineers and building inspectors visited the room. They would spread plans on the single banquet table in the room's middle and try to decipher the maze.

Eventually, contractors learned any change they attempted had to be made by mapping on their own. Only long-time veterans of the building were allowed to make repairs after a new air-conditioning serviceman climbed into an air duct in the west band room and lost his way for two days.

He said he'd become turned around early, and when he thought he was going back the way he'd come he was actually going deeper into the building. He told his supervisor he peeked into classroom after classroom through the ceiling vents, but never recognizing a landmark that would orient him. His supervisor reported the man said, "Some of those students didn't look normal! Not like any kids I ever seen," but when they pressed him to explain, he quit talking, and the next day he quit his job.

The plans themselves, if laid one atop the other, and if they could somehow be made transparent, would become like an encyclopedia entry of the human body. The top plan revealed the skin, but underneath ran veins and nerves, and the next layer showed the muscles, and muscles covered organs, while organs hid the skeleton, except the transparent man that was Hareton was dozens of pages thick, and the illustrations would have to be peeled back horizontally and vertically.

An old city planner claimed the blueprints were fluid. If you looked at them long enough, the dimensions would change. A room that existed on one diagram might be in a different place when you went back to check its dimensions, or it might not be there at all.

Stories that if you put your palms on the blueprints, your skin would tingle and become warm, were just a myth. The plans were old and poorly filed. Over the years, dust had leaked into the drawers, obscuring the fine details, and time had faded the oldest diagrams. Finding

the schematic was difficult, and the architects weren't careful with how accurately their plans were drawn.

All schools have a certain timelessness about them. The world moves on, but the classrooms wait, unchanged, and the teachers who stand before the students unwind time in September, their early-June triumphs now a memory, and the students who face them, looking so much like the students who had just left, that the teachers sometimes feel their efforts hadn't begun, even the long-time teachers entered September renewed.

It's the first day of school! the youngest students would whisper to each other. It's the first day of school!

Outside, peace succeeded war until peace unveiled a war again. Elections shuffled politicians from one job to another. Cars replaced horses. Better cars replaced older cars. Televisions appeared where radios once sat. Black and white images became color. Color became 3D, and then 4D, and then the televisions interfaced with the brain so there was no visible device to see.

Explorers reached both the south and north pole. They plunged the ocean depths. They walked on the moon and on Mars, and then froze themselves for journeys that left the sun so far behind it could not be picked from the billion other stars.

Still, it's the first day of school at Hareton again. Students become unstuck from the world because the classroom is a world, a thousand tiny worlds connected by hallways. Each day in these tiny worlds behind classroom doors creations take place. Edens for the innocents, where knowledge hangs unplucked.

"Could I have your attention?" the teacher says, and everything beyond the school drops away.

What year are we in? What is the planet like outside? Is it dangerous? Do people love or hate there?

How long has my teacher been standing in front of the room? We can never know.

Once, as an homage to a retiring teacher, the senior class assembled the teacher's yearbook photos into a flip book, each photo with the

teacher smiling earnestly at the camera. Four decades of teaching. The teacher sat at the retirement party when he had a moment to himself. He ruffled the pages with his thumb. If he let the pages snap by in one direction, he aged. His hair grew gray and the wrinkles deepened.

But if he flipped the other way, the years dropped. His eyes brightened. His skin smoothed. At the end, he faced the camera a young man. Bring me my students, he seemed to say. It's the first day of school.

The teacher smiled at himself, and next year his old room would have a new teacher. Next year, as if no time had passed at all, the lessons began again.

Any sufficiently sized public building houses a miniature ecosystem. Certainly at the microscopic level, flora and fauna are nearly limitless. Every surface teems with organisms striving to duplicate themselves. Desktops, door handles, banisters, drinking fountains, pens and pencils (which all too often go into students' mouths), chairs, books and lunch trays swarm with the unseen.

Mrs Fenimore, a 6th through 8th grade mathematics teacher, starting the year after the Soviet Union exploded their first nuclear weapon, wiped down her desks each morning with a mix of water, alcohol and lemon oil she had concocted herself. Students sometimes complained their books slid off their desks too easily, but she countered that an antiseptic environment was a healthy environment. The room smelled like a citrus grove, and for all her years in the room, through all the equations and formulas she wrote in her neat hand on the board, all the papers she collected and graded, she never suffered a cold or flu. In twenty-seven years, she didn't miss a single day.

Above the microscopic menagerie, the larger denizens walk, fly, ooze and crawl. Cockroaches, various beetles, millipedes and centipedes, slugs in the damp ooze of seldom-visited access spaces, many shapes and sizes of spiders, flies, moths, ants, mites, fleas and others. Occasionally, too, insects that don't flourish inside are trapped: grasshoppers, wasps, praying mantises, katydids, butterflies, and such.

Vertebrates find their niche too. Mice, naturally, but deeper in the school's hidden niches, rats with phone-cord thick tails, and tucked away in the higher places bats, some no bigger than a child's thumb, who cling to the walls and ceiling during the day and flit through cracks to hunt outside at night.

On occasion, birds are found in the building. A pigeon built a nest in the gym's high rafters and shed feathers and tiny bits of string onto the polished floor for weeks before a janitor captured it.

One year a chemistry teacher opened her classroom in the early morning, and a fox dashed out the door and down the hallway. How it got into the building and where it went were never discovered.

Inexplicably, and unique to Hareton, a student walking between classes will occasionally see a rabbit. It will hop around a corner, and when the excited student runs around to see it again, it has disappeared. Unlike the fox in the chemistry classroom or the bird in the gym, rabbits are spotted often enough that the students believe they are a special breed of indoor rabbits who thrive on bits of food students drop during the day.

It's considered good luck to see a rabbit in the school.

The janitorial staff at Hareton is both nameless and huge. Or better it is to say their names are forgettable. Bob. Sal. Tad. Joan. Jim. Tish. Ken. Kat.

Halls need to be swept. Boards filled with the days' lessons wait to be wiped down after the students have gone home. In the chalkboard era, a damp rag turned many times would clean away the marks so the board looked new again in the morning, and the learning started on a fresh field. In the dry-erase marker era, a chemical spritz from a bottle hung from the belt was enough to melt away words' shadows so the white board sparkled as clean as a Kansas field after a spring snow.

Even when most teachers switched to digital displays and pull down screens, the janitors dusted lenses and wiped monitors and vacuumed keyboards.

Beyond their cleaning, they open stuck lockers, repair broken equipment, haul folding chairs and tables from event to event, lubricate moving parts, repaint scratches, remove old posters from the wall, direct lost visitors to the office, work as campus security, and become friends to the students who acknowledge them (or who are assigned to clean up chores as punishment).

Whether they know it or not, their hero is John Kapelos, an actor who played Carl, a janitor, in *The Breakfast Club*. "I am the eyes and ears of this institution, my friends!" Carl said, and it is true.

The janitors know about liquor bottles in the trash cans. They read the notes dropped on the floor. They catch couples who have snuck into the wardrobe storage area behind the stage. They find paper to roll joints. They comfort kids who have hidden themselves to cry. They see teachers grading late at night.

Frank, a janitor who couldn't find a job after his dishonorable army discharge (he refused an order from an insane sergeant to open fire on an enemy he couldn't see in a sleeping village in the blackness), heard Mr Timmons talking to himself in his room evening after evening. Timmons' wife was ill. They'd never had their own children. The medical bills were too high.

Frank knew about a bottle of pills in Timmons' desk, barbiturates prescribed to Timmons' wife. So Frank stayed close to Timmons' room, sweeping the hallway slowly, quietly. Timmons sobbed at his desk.

When Timmons opened the medicine and a fifth of bourbon from his briefcase, Frank entered the room.

"I just need to clean up a bit here, Mr Timmons."

Timmons looked up at him, his eyes red-rimmed, surprised. In his misery, he'd come to believe no one else in the world existed.

"I'll take a sip of that joy juice, if you're offering," said Frank.

Timmons glanced at the bottle, as if he didn't know it was there.

Frank found a couple paper cups. They drank until almost midnight. When Timmons took a bathroom break, Frank slipped the pills into his pocket.

Timmons' wife recovered, while the seniors voted him teacher of the year six years later. Frank and Timmons never talked about that night where they toasted to each other with paper cups, although they passed each other in the hallways many times.

On Frank's last day in the school, fifteen years from when he'd spent an evening drinking with that very sad man, after he'd turned in his retirement papers, he found a small, wrapped box on his desk, sitting beside his clipboard filled with instructions for the day. In the box glistened a gold-rimmed shot glass. The note read, "For when paper cups aren't good enough."

Eventually, it seemed, the janitors became indistinguishable from the building. Their coveralls had the same unpainted brick, faded grey-blue tint. Morning, evening, summer and winter, they roamed Hareton's convoluted hallways. Teachers who arrived very early to start planning their days sometimes ran into janitors coming up the stairs from the school's lowest levels. It seemed they never left. One wondered, if one were a wondering person, if the janitors lived in the building, or if the building generated them spontaneously.

They were pale, pale, pale, and always sweeping.

Not everyone supports the Hareton School. At various times forces have allied themselves to close the facility. It is too large, goes one argument. Focusing so many students in one place encourages depersonalization. A single, large academic facility destroys innovation and initiative.

Another group said Hareton had become a dinosaur. Old plumbing, old electrical systems, tired color schemes, and aging infrastructure needed replacing, not upgrades.

Most opposition came from fear, from not understanding. What happens in that huge, impenetrable structure on the hill? Students sometimes could not tell their parents about their day.

"What did you learn?"

"Dunno."

But the child smiled, and the parents knew their young one was holding back information. The parents who attended themselves could

hardly relate what a day at Hareton could be like. There were classes, certainly, and lessons to be learned, but the former students had unfocussed memories of history classes that seemed more like dreams of history than lectures and notes.

"Do you remember the Civil War in Mrs Hatcher's class," one alumni asked an old classmate at a twenty-year reunion.

The other nodded, holding a beer in one hand, and rubbing his shoulder with the other, as if feeling an old wound. They both cocked their heads in thoughtfulness and memory, recalling a Springfield rifle's flat crack, the high whine of a mini-ball passing overhead, the smell from the horses and themselves, the splintery fence rail pressed against their chests as they took aim and fired.

"I remember Gettysburg."

"Cemetery Ridge."

They drank, leaning their elbows on the tabletop, lost in images that rose like fish in their memories, like old soldiers returned from battle.

Not every bond issue in the county passes. Sometimes property values fall, and the school's budget shrinks, but there always seems to be money for the latest expansions: a therapy pool in the hospital annex, three handball/racquet ball courts to be shared by the recreation district and the school, solar panels for the south facing roofs, a new trough for the trout farm, elliptical machines in the shared community center, smart boards for the science department, and laptop carts for the library.

When the cement plant closed north of town, there was talk that the county couldn't afford Hareton's expense, a school that big. Money could be saved, the argument went, if students walked to smaller, neighborhood schools instead of boarding busses to Hareton. But the arguments failed. In a year, new businesses moved in. Hiring went up, and closing the school discussions faded.

Once, though, the county commissioners met for the sole purpose of making cuts to the budget for Hareton. They debated far into the morning hours. At three in the morning, at the time when men's souls turn to their mortality and dreams cut loose from day to day thoughts, they passed two plans for school improvement: a parking

lot resurfacing, and landscaping for the unimproved land next to the tennis courts. When the board members woke the next morning, they couldn't recreate the discussion that went from their resolution to save money to the decision to spend it.

Assistant Principal Weber moved up to administration after seven years teaching 8th grade band. He put away the sheet music and band fund raising catalogs, replacing them with weekly discipline reports and teacher evaluations. He packed his clarinet that he had used to demonstrate new music to the band, and he never played it again.

When he'd been a teacher, he dreaded the assistant principal's visits to his room. They are watching me! he thought. They're judging me!

But when he started making his own visits, he felt like a collaborator, a friendly uncle who loved his teachers and wanted them to succeed. If he saw the teacher could make a change, maybe wait a bit longer before answering a question to the class he had asked, or writing instructions more clearly on the board, then he would write a sticky note to put in the teacher's box. After a while, the staff talked about the Weber-gram they'd received.

"Never met a metaphor he couldn't butcher," said Miss McToom, a third-year English teacher who worked for an hour and a half every night on a novel she would still be writing fourteen years later when she and Assistant Principal Weber married. She showed her latest in the lounge: "Keep your eye on the ball," it read. She'd received a note from him the week before. "Stay on your toes on the line."

Laughing, she said, "What does that even mean?" but she kept the notes in her desk.

Assistant Principal Weber found a journal Assistant Principal Schmidt had kept sixty years earlier. Schmidt had tucked the leather-bound volume behind files in a wooden cabinet drawer in Weber's office.

In Schmidt's neat hand, Weber read about kids who were suspended for chewing gum, kids whose parents were called when the kid was caught smoking. Schmidt had a plan to prevent alcohol from "contaminating" football games.

He copied his own memos to teachers into the journal. The mandate for chaperones to make kids dance at least a hand's width apart to "leave room for god" particularly amused Weber. At this year's homecoming, Weber had advised the chaperones to not watch the kids too closely on the dance floor. "It's not like when you were kids," he'd said to the teachers, some in their mid twenties. "As long as they're not taking off each other's clothes, leave them alone."

Late at night, when Weber walked the halls for his final inspection, before he'd drive home, he imagined he could hear dance music coming from the gym, old, big band music. When he opened the doors to the darkened gym, the music faded away, but for a second, Weber thought he saw high school girls in long dresses swirling around with their partners, their bellies and pelvises at least a hands width apart.

At his career's end, when Weber chaperoned his last dance, the former Miss McToom stood beside him, holding his hand, two old lovers who were ready to step aside and let the youngsters take over. Lights strobed psychedelically. Techno music pounded. The lyrics, when he could make them out, were obscene, and the kids danced so tightly together that Weber figured there would be no premarital sex afterwards. They'd all be spent on the dance floor.

But as the students gyrated, as the music crashed down around him, he thought he could see the dancers' stately figures from years gone by, mixing with their modern counterparts. He heard the band behind the band, the old bands and the gone bands, still echoing in the gym. In the old music a single clarinet took up the tune. Weber recognized the solo. He'd played it himself when he was young.

He squeezed his wife's hand. There's always room for god, he thought, no matter how close they dance. There's always room for god when the kids dance.

Through the years, the art classes took on different parts of Hareton as community art projects. Built into nooks in the hallways, sculptures gazed out on passing students, classical figures, naturally: Einstein and Newton and Mendel in the science wing, and Beethoven and Bach and

Mozart near the band rooms, but also Dylan and Hendrix and Malcolm X and Hawking.

In other nooks were more...interpretive pieces: a bronze whale with a baby's face, a marble hand where a mouth filled with needle teeth opened at each finger's end, a hulking piece in granite – the largest sculpture in the school – a shambling figure draped in tentacles and inhuman eyes peeking from deep, folded slits. No student lingered near the tentacled statue, and looking at it too long provoked a deep unease, nausea even, and for some children, when they had nightmares, the unnamed sculpture came alive to follow them wherever they ran.

Murals covered the largest walls. The westward expansion stretched eighty feet wide above the lockers in the oldest hallway, covered wagons and trains and telegraph lines marched from the cities on one side to canyons and prairies and gold fields on the other.

Another mural traced the history of music, starting with cellos, violins, flutes and trumpets on one end, and then tracing a long wavy musical notes line, minstrel singers and blues musicians and rock and rollers mixed with gramophones and jukeboxes and phonographs and portable music players.

A sports mural covered a gym wall.

A giant solar system loomed over the entrance to the science classes.

Smaller art projects surprised even long-time teachers: Theodore Hareton's portrait tucked behind a door to the attendance office, a bench that looked as if it had been assembled from human leg bones in a remote corner of the school's wildlife observation area, a mobile of ceramic heads, each one grimacing in pain, hanging in the back of the wood shop. A hand tooled toilet in the bathroom next to the agriculture classroom.

The German teacher and French teacher met for lunch each day in the French teacher's room. They called their daily meetings the "Magainot Meal". They'd eaten in the room together for eleven years.

"When did you put that painting up?" asked the German teacher. He gestured toward the door with his sandwich.

"Which painting?" The French teacher dug listlessly into his salad. He'd been trying to lower

his cholesterol for months, but all he wanted to eat were hamburgers dripping with fat and French fries drenched in mayonnaise. He looked where the German teacher pointed.

A simple painting of a mountain meadow hung in the shadows above the door. Slanting sunlight in a green bar cut through the trees, illuminating two rabbits crouched side by side next to a lilac bush. The lilac bloomed in the angled light.

The French teacher looked at the image for a long time. It seemed as if the light in the painting gradually changed, as if the sun was going down. The image grew darker. "Isn't that remarkable," he said. "I've never seen it before."

After that, they both studied the painting for a moment or two during their lunches, but they didn't comment on it again. Some days there were two rabbits. Some days, three or four. Occasionally the light came from the other direction. The lilac bush became a rose bush, and then an azalea. The seasons changed. Neither man ever touched the painting, but once, late at night when the French teacher had been grading at his desk, long past dinner, he pulled a chair to the wall where he could stand on it. He looked at the picture's frame. Dust covered it, but it looked like metal, like burnished gold.

As schools changed, so did Hareton. Life turned away from the school. Where seniors had once lived or died on the teams' fate, and tears were shed over who became the homecoming queen and king, the kids took afterschool jobs. Some took classes on line, and some tried the new neural curriculum that tied them to machines and downloaded course information directly, although the results were never consistent. A student might be able to speak Spanish who had never spoken it before, but he could have forgotten where he lived.

More students lived in the resident halls as semi-permanent boarders, while almost all the teachers took rooms for the faculty.

The school met their needs. The world outside could fall apart and did, but Hareton's on-campus mall remained a place to buy goods, to seek entertainment, and to meet with friends. The clinics serviced health problems, and the chapels

catered to the souls. Classes for every knowledge were offered from preschool to retirees. In one hour students could be in a traditional class, like Sophomore English, while down the hall elderly women could be studying the Teachings of Zoroaster. Five-year-olds might be reciting the alphabet in a room next to college-aged students practicing cranio-sacral therapy.

Hareton became all things to all people, and eventually there was no reason to leave her.

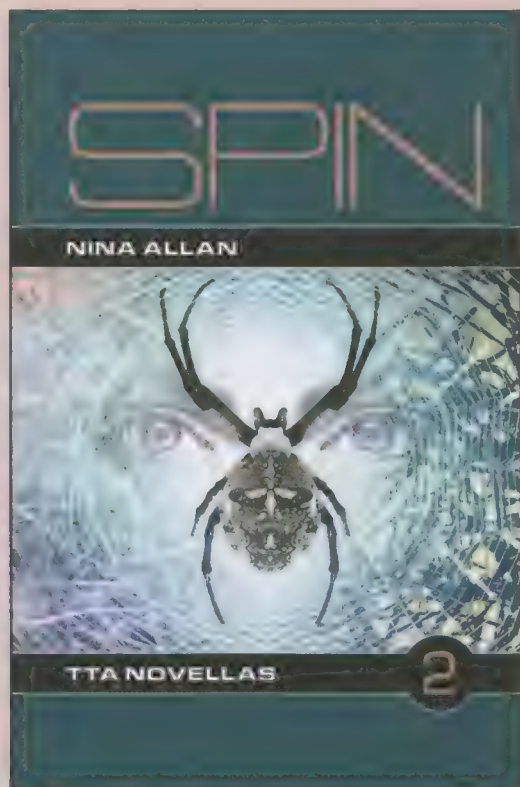
And I don't leave. In the morning, feet rustling in the hallway outside my dorm awaken me. In the cafeteria, dozens of breakfast foods await, and then I go to class. Today, I spent the morning at the aquarium studying cephalopod life cycles. My art instructor encouraged me to draw what interested me, so I've filled my notebooks with waving arms and octopus eyes.

In the afternoon, my calculus class follows composition, where my semester project is a

short novel (that I'm also illustrating), and in the evening I'm taking the laboratory section for the human sexuality class I started last semester. My study partner, Elizabeth, who is finishing a complicated bridge in her engineering class, has decided I should help her with a paper she's writing on the less practiced positions in the Kama Sutra.

We have discussed taking a two-person dorm or moving into a domed collective.

Urgency isn't driving us, however. Our choices are many, and the curriculum is broad. I have decided, though, that I would like to teach. Our teachers seem so confident and curious and passionate. I see them in the cafes, heads close together, swapping classroom stories, discussing students, sharing learning like generous royalty, following knowledge like eager hounds. I've seen their honor wall and the names, the many, many names of the teachers who have served in Hareton through the centuries, and I think I would



COVER ART BY BEN BALDWIN

"Nina Allan's re-imagining of the Arachne myth, with its receding overlays of the modern and the antique, creates a space all its own. The scene is clean and minimal, the light Mediterranean, the story seems musing and sad: but by the last two pages, *Spin* has you in a grip that persists long after you put it down" **M. John Harrison**

"The writing is precise, the imagery vividly sensual; by re-imagining ancient myth in a stunningly realised alternate Greece, Nina Allan traps you in a web of story" **Paul Kincaid**

"Allan expertly weaves SF, fantasy and mythology into a subtle, seamless, dreamlike whole. I loved it" **Neil Williamson**

"This is why we have novellas, to let stories unroll at their own pace, to give us Layla's long journey by bus with her embroidery hoop across the Peloponnese, the encounter with the old woman, the drink from a spring of mountain-cold water, the African hotel clerk in Corinth. Journeys mean something in a story like this one. They shouldn't be rushed. They

like to see my name among them.

Now, I sit in the cafeteria again, contemplating dinner. I lean back in my chair and gaze at the skylight that stretches the room's length. Beyond it, the stars shine without winking. Beyond the skylight is the world outside, but no one goes there anymore. Was it war that drove us inside? Was it plague or famine or pestilence? I don't know. There is a rumor that Hareton encompasses the entire Earth, and for all I know, it could be true. There's another rumor that says there never was an Earth, and that Hareton has always been and will always be, that we cannot exist beyond Hareton.

I do know that I have looked through the windows in my classroom to what lies beyond and seen nothing that tempts me.

In the hallway, on the way to my room, a rabbit jumped from a doorway, twitched its nose twice in my direction, then hopped past. I stepped aside so that it wouldn't shy away, and

I wondered what mission drove it, and what kind of life it led, and I knew that tomorrow I would be lucky and fulfilled, and classes would be interesting.

At Hareton K-12 County School and Adult Extension, in the halls of the school eternal, that's the way life goes, the way it ought to go, and all that passes in its compass is holy.

James teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. His fiction has made numerous appearances in most of the major science fiction and fantasy magazines. He has been a finalist for a Nebula Award, the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award, and been reprinted in many year's best collections. His first novel, *Summer of the Apocalypse*, was released in 2006. His third collection of stories, *The Radio Magician and Other Stories*, received the Colorado Book Award in 2010. His latest collection, *Flying in the Heart of the Lafayette Escadrille*, was released in October of 2012. James blogs at jimvanpelt.livejournal.com.

should be full of places, of encounters: With the young man afflicted with a curse. A fascinating epic poem on which Layla bases her newest work. The masterpieces of ancient sibyls, catching dust in the museum. Spiders weaving in the sunlight, busy at their work. The details so clear, so well-chosen to make a story" **Lois Tilton, Locus Online**

"*Spin* is probably one of the best literary tales you'll read this year" **Upcoming4.me**

"If you're looking for an extraordinary and beautifully written story that will charm you with its happenings you've just found it. *Spin* is perfect entertainment for SFF readers, because it's a well written and surprisingly literary novella, which combines science fiction, fantasy and mythology. Excellent!" **Rising Shadow**

"I heartily recommend *Spin* to fans of literary SF and fantasy, and especially to those already familiar with Nina Allan's work" **Lucian Poll**

"A beautifully told story that bodes well for the future of the TTA Novellas series" **SF Revu**

"*Spin* is ambitious and enigmatic. Call it dark fantasy if you will, though that description seems at odds with a story so illuminated by bold Mediterranean light and colour. Whatever *Spin* is, it is further evidence that Nina Allan is one of the most interesting and rewarding new writers to emerge in recent years" **Gary Dalkin, Amazing Stories**

"Allan's prose is as adaptable as her juggling of SF and mythical materials: finely observed and realistic when it needs to be, lyrical when it begins to focus on romance and self-discovery. It's an elegant, quiet, and quite satisfying fable" **Gary K. Wolfe, Locus**

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SAM BOUGHT THE FORECLOSURE ON ENFIELD AT

auction, sight unseen. He assumed its history would be questionable, but as the plan was to gut, remodel and resell, history was irrelevant. Not until the day he took possession did Sam learn the previous owner had been a semi-professional magician, stage name of Kurricke. The magician had vanished after living in the two-bedroom ranch for seventeen years, leaving spoiled milk in the refrigerator, dishes in the sink, and all the tools of his trade in unlocked trunks.

GREG KURZAWA

DARK GARDENS



Sam wanted none of it: not the costumes and stage props in the second bedroom, nor the closets full of dresses, shoes, and wigs. The winch and stand in the basement might have been saleable, but the wicker trunk of journals and 8mm tapes was utterly worthless. He had no use for the mannequins in the attic – some upright on stands, some dismembered and crated. Stage paraphernalia had no place in his investment strategy.

Sam made drastic inroads that first weekend, hauling the magician's junk down from the attic and out through the garage. Without ceremony, he resigned everything to the rented dumpster occupying the driveway.

His plans didn't change until Monday afternoon, when he rolled up an oil-stained carpet in the basement and uncovered the hatch.

Ascending from the basement Monday evening, Sam went to the garage looking for the wicker chest he'd wrestled out earlier that morning. This, he dragged back into the house and parked in front of the dark green couch, which he'd already decided would be the last thing to go – immediately after the 32" Magnavox. Settling on the couch, he unfastened the latches and lifted the lid.

Composition notebooks and 8mm tapes. Tucked to one side was a Sony handheld camera wrapped in its own cables, and on top of everything, a 4x6 photograph in a thin pewter frame. Sam lifted the picture out to study it more closely.

Professionally done, the photograph captured a mismatched couple. She: young and pretty, seated on a chair with hands in her lap, her expression somewhat bewildered. He: presumably the magician Kurricke, standing behind her, his hand on the bare skin between shoulder and neck. He was perhaps fifty. His hair, going to gray, looked unaccustomed to the comb. Here was a man who couldn't iron a shirt, who'd forgotten how to knot a tie. He grinned at the camera with an excited, boyish charm, thrilled at his own good fortune.

The woman was too young to be the magician's wife or lover, Sam decided. A daughter, maybe. But his fingers on her throat were too posses-

sive, too intimate for that relationship. Her skin was perfect, smooth and cream-colored, her hair a flossy brown silk utterly at odds with her skin type. To Sam, her beauty seemed inviolate, although there was something unusual in her posture. It didn't look, Sam thought, as though she'd applied her own makeup.

Sam set the frame aside.

A cursory inventory of the trunk's remaining contents revealed that the notebooks were neither numbered nor dated. Similarly, the tapes were loose and unlabeled. Feeling certain that something left behind by the magician would explain the hatch, Sam chose a notebook off the disordered pile. Opening it to the middle, he read:

How God must detest us. How revolting to Him our helplessness and stupidity.

Hitler exterminated the crippled and the weak for no better reason than that they were crippled and weak. Even though he too was human – a bag of flesh no different than those he gassed. How much greater the divide between us and God? How much more profound His hatred of us?

Why should the suffering of the weak evoke hatred?

I heard a story about a boy who crushed the head of a wounded dog because it hadn't the decency to die. I understand now that it wasn't the piteous animal's misery he sought to end, but his own. How miserable then is God, watching us flail about, blind and bleating, in His dark garden? We are ignorant of our own ignorance, rolling and stamping over all His creation.

How are any of us still alive?

Sam closed the book and once more took up the photograph. This time, he slid it from its frame and turned it over.

To E.

Love J.

"J. Kurricke," Sam said. "What happened here?"

He lifted out the handheld Sony camera and its bundle of cables. It was time to watch a tape.

Kurricke the magician, in white shirt and glittering black vest, takes the stage of what ap-

pears to be a high school gymnasium. The camera records from behind a sparse audience; the quality of the tape is poor. The magician brandishes scarves, hoops, and giant playing cards for an audience that hardly acknowledges him. The constant murmur of peripheral conversations obscures his sad jokes. Occasionally, an adolescent face leans in from the side to leer into the camera.

Twelve uncomfortable minutes into his show, Kurricke ducks into the wings. Returning a moment later, he is pushing in front of him a mannequin on a wheeled chair. She sits woodenly in a gray skirt and white blouse, hands composed in her lap, bare head glossy under the stage lights.

Wheeling the chair to center stage, Kurricke asks a question of the crowd in a voice that is audible, but incomprehensible. Someone throws a crumpled wad of paper. It makes a high, slow arc before falling short.

Unconcerned by this reaction, Kurricke throws his arms wide with a shout, as though introducing an act superior to his own.

Nothing happens.

Kurricke has forgotten the mannequin's wig, which hangs on a hook behind the chair. The hair is brown and luxurious. Embarrassed, Kurricke shows it quickly to the now silent audience, then slips it over the mannequin's head. Hair in place, he leaps back and throws up the same grand gesture. This time his shout is clear.

"Evelyn!"

The mannequin's eyes open. The magician – arms still raised – beams proudly at his audience, who fail to share his triumph. Behind him, Evelyn has but little control over herself. Her head jerks as though palsied. Her legs kick out then back again, heels scraping the stage floor.

Kurricke grins as though at a beloved daughter.

"Evelyn," the old magician croons. "Evelyn, will you dance?" Holding both her hands, Kurricke draws her out of the chair, and encourages a lurching step forward.

Pause.

Rewind.

Sam left the couch to put his face closer to the television's quivering image.

Play.

Her eyes open. Her head turns. She grabs for Kurricke's offered hands and rises. A step. A stumble. He catches her, and his lips are near her ear. Is he whispering to her? His hands hold her slight waist. She clings to him, but her eyes are on the audience.

Pause.

Was that fear in her eyes?

Rewind.

Play.

Evelyn falls into Kurricke, throwing her arms around his neck. He holds her, lips to her ear. His knees are bent to support her weight. Over his shoulder, her eyes are wide. Yes, she is afraid. More than afraid.

They dance – or rather, Kurricke drags her across the stage. Evelyn is shockingly graceless. A spin – she stumbles. A dip – she clutches him, terrified. The spectacle goes on too long. The audience grows restless.

When Kurricke at last returns her to the chair, her wig has come askew. Kurricke straightens it for her, and arranges her hands in her lap. Wheeling her around to face the audience, he stands behind her, hands on her shoulders.

"Evelyn, you were splendid this evening," he declares to the audience. "Will you wave good night to the kind people?"

Evelyn begins to look back at him, but the magician faces her forward with one hand on either cheek. He will not stop grinning at his audience. He waves, as though to demonstrate what is expected. Evelyn rotates a rigid hand in a shy parade wave.

While her arm is still in the air, Kurricke wrenches her head to the side, so she is looking suddenly over her own shoulder. Her body jerks, and Kurricke lifts her head away. Evelyn's arm drops – *clack* – to her side. Her leg kicks out from under her skirt.

There is some scattered applause, but mostly he has provoked an uneasy silence.

Kurricke bows, and bows again, though the applause has died. He leans back to look into the wings because the curtains are not closing. He

raises a hand to catch the attention of someone only he can see. He is still smiling – still waving – when the curtains, like walls of black water, sweep in to engulf him.

Sam's ad in the Austin Classifieds read: *Need services of one SCUBA diver. Caving experience and camera required. Will pay for time.*

Sam stepped outside when the black Jeep backed boldly into the narrow slice of driveway beside the dumpster. The driver had the door pushed open before the engine quieted. Bald and unsmiling, the man who stepped down was older than Sam had expected.

"David?" Sam asked as he crossed the dead grass.

"And you must be Sam."

Sam offered his hand, which David squeezed harder than necessary. Sam waved an arm back at the house. "It's inside," he said.

"Well, then," said the diver, lifting a backpack from the rear bed, "let's have a look."

Sam had arranged two portable worklights around the hatch in the basement. He switched them on, and shadows burned away under the brilliant stare of twin 500 Watt halogen bulbs.

"Looks like a sub's escape hatch," David said. Twenty-four inches in diameter, the hatch was bolted to the concrete floor with twelve thumb-sized rivets. The diver glanced up. "What's this for?"

Suspended over the hatch, a pulley system had been bolted to the underside of a supporting beam.

"It was all here when I moved in," Sam said. He saw David about to ask so added, "Five days ago."

Before there were more questions, Sam took a knee and turned the handwheel counter-clockwise. From below came the solid thunk of internal mechanisms retracting. Getting his feet under him, Sam pulled up on the hatch, which opened smoothly on its hinge and locked into a leaning position twenty degrees past the apex.

He rose and stepped back. Side by side, the two men stared into a pool of dark water.

Blandly, David said, "Wow."

Sam agreed.

"Bomb shelter?" David asked.

Having already considered and dismissed that idea, Sam gave a skeptical shrug. "I don't think so. There's no ladder."

David's brow furrowed. He knelt next to the hatch, and with his face near the water, breathed deep. "It's not septic." He dipped his fingers and tasted. "Not salt, either."

Without warning, he plunged his arm in the water, reaching not down, but along the underside of the floor. Sam watched him feel around the entire perimeter, then again, this time lying on his stomach, shoulder-deep in water. When he got back on his knees, he looked concerned. Sam imagined it was exactly how he himself had looked after completing the same exercise. Predicting where David's mind was leading him, Sam offered him a broom handle.

"I couldn't find the sides," Sam said. "I already tried, but you've got a longer reach than me."

Holding the broom by its end, David slipped it into the water and probed for anything that would hint at the dimensions of the chamber below them. Finding nothing, he sat up and laid the broom handle aside, mystified.

"Broom handle's sixty inches," Sam said. "My arm's another twenty-four." He went to stand at the chalk mark he'd made on the concrete exactly eighty-four inches from the lip of the hatch. He pointed out the chalk marks he'd drawn around the basement, outlining the minimum circumference of the chamber. It wasn't the entire basement, but it didn't leave much room.

David pulled his backpack next to him and unzipped it. Out came a black mask and an underwater light. Pressing the mask to his face, he switched on the light and plunged his head into the water. He was back in a moment to report, "Nothing. I can't see the sides or the bottom. Have you tested for depth?"

Sam showed David the five hundred foot spool of utility rope and the twelve-pound river anchor he'd tied to the end of it. "I looped it over the pulleys," he said. "Then just dropped it in."

David waited.

"A hundred and eighty-eight feet," Sam said.

David blinked at the hatch. "Odd," he said.

Sam credited the man's composure. His own reaction, upon realizing that his mid-town home

was supported over an abyss by a slab of concrete six inches thick, hadn't been nearly so indifferent.

"At this point, I just want to know what's down there."

"Right," David said, all business. "Let's get the gear."

Five minutes later they had David's equipment piled beside the hatch. After looping the yellow line through the pulley, they cast the anchor and let it sink. While the pulley rattled and the rope played out, David stripped off his T-shirt and cargo shorts. He proceeded to stuff himself into a neoprene wetsuit.

When the anchor hit bottom, David looped the line around the handwheel and pulled out the slack. After knotting it, he looked at Sam. "That's a good knot," he said. "Don't touch that knot."

From one of his bags, David produced a spool of braided nylon rope and a handheld underwater light. "I'll clip onto the anchor line up here and follow it all the way down. On the bottom, I'll tie off with this –" he shook the spool of rope – "and go exploring. I've only got about twenty-five minutes of bottom time, so I can't go far."

David shrugged into his vest – burdened with gauges, dials and hoses – and zipped up. He had a spare everything. Sitting at the ledge with his legs in the water, he forced his bare feet into a pair of stiff, black flippers.

"Aim those big lights into the water after I'm down," David said. "If all mine go black and I lose the anchor line, I'll need them to get back."

With a little heave, David slipped legs first into the water. "Tanks," he said.

One at a time, Sam passed the tanks into the water, and David attached them to fittings under his arms, where they dangled like a pair of strange wings. He jerked a thumb at his bag. "There's a little book in there with a few names and numbers. I'd appreciate you letting them know what happened if I don't make it back.

"Relax," he said when Sam balked. "Me dying won't come as a shock to anyone." He held up his camera, safe in its clear little box. "I'm going to swim around, have a nice time, take some pictures. You won't even miss me."

With that, he fitted his mask and stuck a regu-

lator in his mouth. Then he disappeared into the black water. His descending lights were obscured by darkness much sooner than Sam would have thought.

Forty-five minutes later, the hiss of breaking bubbles preceded David's return. On surfacing, he peeled away mask and regulator.

"What did you find?" Sam asked.

David hefted a tank out of the water, which Sam took and stood to the side. The next came immediately after.

Twisted into sitting position, David hauled himself out of the hatch. He nodded to his bag while reaching back down to pull off his fins. "Pass me a water, will you?"

Sam handed him a plastic bottle, then watched the diver twist it open and drink deeply.

"What's down there?" he asked again.

David ran a hand over his bare scalp, then lifted the camera. "Easier to just show you."

David sat squarely in the center of the couch, Sam's laptop on the coffee table in front of him. Sam sat beside him.

"This is a hundred and sixty feet," David said.

Mostly dark, the picture featured a circle of illumination on what appeared to be a muddy slope.

"The anchor hit here," David said, touching the screen at the start of a long gouge in the mud. "Then slid off this way." He traced the groove across the otherwise smooth surface to the lip of a sudden abyss. Barely visible, the yellow anchor line faded into the darkness.

"This is about ten feet above the structure," David said.

Sam hadn't finished processing the word 'structure' before David tapped the keyboard.

Next picture: clear, black water and darkness crowding in from all sides; the anchor resting in three inches of black mud, yellow rope angling towards the surface.

"I tied off at the anchor and dropped a flare, just in case."

Next picture: a doorless frame in a featureless wall. Beside it, a glassless double window opening into a black room, the edge of a mantle barely visible at the limit of the light's reach.



"What's that?" Sam touched a vague blur inside the room, barely within range of the flash.

David answered with the next picture: a much closer view. A figure sat in a plain wooden chair in an otherwise empty room. Hands arranged in its lap, it faced an open doorframe on the opposite wall. It wore no clothes, and had no hair. They could not see its face.

Sam sat back. "You went *inside*?"

"I put the camera through the window."

Leaning forward again, Sam said, "It's a mannequin."

"All those pictures were from the first house," David said. "The one right below us."

Sam stared at him. "The *first*?"

Staring at the screen, Sam became aware of David watching him closely. Realizing he had his hand over his mouth, he took it away and nodded at the laptop. "Keep going."

David clicked through a series of images, leaving each one up for just a few seconds. There were bare rooms and bloated furniture, stairways leading into darkness. And mannequins. Some of them were seated, some lying down. One of them stood at a window, another slumped in a dark corner of a drowned room, legs splayed.

"I didn't like it," David said. "I was uncomfortable."

Before Sam could reply, David cleared his throat. "I was running low on mix at that point, so I headed back. At that first house, the one right below us, I thought I'd take a few more pictures before coming up. Maybe go inside."

David tapped a key. The chair was empty.

Sam leaned back, but it wasn't enough distance. Pushing himself out of the couch, he walked a few feet before realizing he had nowhere to go.

"At first I thought I had the wrong house," David continued. "But I could see the glow from my flare, and I never left my guideline. So I went around."

Sam watched from behind the couch, arms folded.

The flare, a brilliant shard of harsh light, illuminated a wide expanse of flat mud in the next picture. Half-buried beside the flare was the anchor. Rising from it to the surface, the yellow line. And there, the silhouette of a figure standing beside the anchor.

"It wasn't moving," David said. "It was like it had been *moved*. Like someone had come while I was gone and just...moved it there."

The next picture was closer, but no more detailed.

"That's as close as I wanted to get," David said. "I'd seen enough, and I was out of gas, so I got out of there. I dropped the rope and swam for the anchor line about fifteen feet up."

David's final picture had been taken from maybe twenty feet up the anchor line, looking back down. Below, the light of the flare seemed crushed by the weight of the darkness around it. Even at that distance, in that darkness, Sam could see how the human-shaped blur had taken hold of the anchor line and lifted its gaze to follow David's ascent.

Sam dragged the trunk in front of David and squatted next to it. "I found this in the attic," he said. Lifting the lid of the trunk revealed the notebooks and tapes. "The previous owner was a stage magician. This was all his."

Seeing that it meant nothing to David, Sam picked up the top notebook. Opening it to one of the pages he'd marked, he read aloud:

There is no food there. They chose the weakest among them to devour. Does that make their world an imitation of ours? Or is it we who imitate them? Who is the higher being: a creature who is exactly as it seems, or we who cower behind civilized performances? Do layers of artifice make us more human, or less so?

Imagine I mold a primitive man from a lump of mud. I might teach him to dance and whistle. I might teach him to speak. Because I am proud, I will dress him like myself. His buttons will always be polished, and his cuffs clean. He will learn to smile, and to laugh. But to whatever majestic heights he aspires, I will always know his secret – even if he forgets it himself. It is the same as mine: under our masks, we are only so much mud.

If we, who think ourselves so fine, were stripped down to our bare essence, would we be any different? I think not. Mud and spit are all that is real. The rest is masks and lies heaped layer upon layer.

"He knew something," Sam said with confi-

dence. "I haven't read all of them, or watched everything yet. But there's got to be something in there that explains *that*." He stabbed a finger at his laptop.

Sam could see that David remained unconvinced, so he turned on the television and put the first tape into the camera.

After the closing of the curtains, Sam felt a grim satisfaction at the stunned look on David's face.

"That mannequin..." David said.

"There were more in the attic."

David shifted in discomfort. "Where are they now?"

"The dumpster. In pieces."

"But did they... I mean, do you think he got them from down there?"

"They had to come from somewhere."

Sam watched David thinking. After a moment, the older man's eyes shifted to the open trunk. Pushing aside the layers of notebooks, he uncovered the 8mm tapes beneath. "What's on the rest of these?"

"More of the same."

David handed one to Sam. "Show me."

They spent all afternoon watching the tapes. Both agreed that Kurricke was a mediocre magician, at best. They took to fast-forwarding his act to get to Evelyn's appearances.

In the earlier tapes, Evelyn couldn't so much as rise from her chair. Her hands fluttered in her lap, her head jerked helplessly – an epileptic parody. During one show she spasmed off the chair. Back arching, heels drumming the stage. In later shows, she remained in her chair and responded to simple commands. At the end of those shows, a proudly grinning Kurricke would lift her arm to help her wave. Once, after helping her stand, Kurricke stepped back to applaud her when a seizure shook her legs from under her. One of her arms broke off when she hit the floor, but she continued waving. The crowd was appalled.

As the timeline progressed, Evelyn became less awkward. Like a child learning to walk, she stumbled stiff-legged across the stage, groping for the encouraging magician. In one show, she

danced an awkward solo number under the spotlights, during which she seemed a horrid, life-sized puppet jerked about on unseen strings. She performed a clumsy curtsy when finished, and blew a kiss to the audience. Out came Kurricke from the wings: grinning, waving, smiling – the proud showman. Evelyn sat obediently in her chair, soundless as he twisted off her head and held it aloft for all to see.

Sam peeled a cold slice of pizza from the box on the counter, then couldn't decide if he wanted it reheated or cold. It was 11:37 pm by the clock on the stove.

"Listen to this," David called from the living room.

Sam dropped his cold pizza on a dirty plate and carried it to the living room. David had one of Kurricke's notebooks open on his lap. They'd been searching the journals while watching the tapes, reading to one another the most intriguing excerpts.

David waited for Sam to sit, then read:

"Eat not of the blood," said Yahweh to His people. "For the blood is the life."

It is forbidden fruit, this eating of flesh and blood. Yet Christ gave His to the disciples, and they drank of it. He gave them His flesh, and they ate that, too.

We know what happened to those wretches in the Garden of Eden when they ate what they ought not have. And we know what happened to the disciples when they feasted on their Christ. But what if He had eaten of their flesh? What if He had tasted their blood?

I have read that true evil is the forceful attempt to ascend to a higher plane. Was this not Lucifer's sin, and all those angels deceived by him? It was, God's throne being as high above the angels as the angels are above Man. He stormed Heaven to take what was not his, and his punishment was terrible. For him, and for us. The same can be said of those in Babel and their offensive tower.

The message is clear: to ascend is forbidden.

But what of ascension as a gift? Is it not what Christ promises His believers? A place in a higher world? A position for which we are not suited as we are, but for which we must be groomed. The

fruit that must be had is the same as it ever was. The blood is the life. Eat of the flesh. Become more like Me.

If true evil is striving for ascension where it is not permitted – what, then, is true goodness? It must be the reverse: a willing descent. This also is in keeping with the Christian mythology. Did not the Christ descend to us from a higher world? And was it not deemed good? He did, and it was.

This is my blood: drink of it.

This is my body: eat of it.

These symbols are more than metaphor. They are the reality. And the rules must be the same regardless of the direction one travels. The fruit is the blood is the life.

And so her elevation is good. It is my gift to her.

As for my descent – she has no blood, but she has flesh, or something like it. Will it suffice?

We shall see.

Stripped of appetite, Sam dropped his plate of untouched pizza on the coffee table. "I can't do this anymore tonight."

David glanced at his watch. "I want to go down again," he announced. "Tomorrow."

"You're not serious."

"We should take more pictures. Collect evidence. I'll bring up some samples."

"Samples? Of what? Evidence of what?"

"You want people to think you're crazy?"

"No."

"So we take pictures. We document."

Sam rubbed his face.

David pulled a thick wallet from his back pocket. Sliding out the folded check Sam had given him earlier, he tore it in half and put the pieces on the coffee table. He tapped them with two fingers.

"We shouldn't stop now," he said. Then he pushed up from the couch, one of the magician's notebooks in hand. "You mind if I take a couple of these with me? I probably won't sleep anyway."

Sam waved his permission.

At the door, David looked back. "Listen, I'm not trying to tell you what to do, okay? But I don't think you should stay here tonight. It doesn't seem safe."

It only took a moment for Sam to tick off every friend he had in the area, none of whom

he wanted to call at midnight to admit he was frightened to spend the night alone.

"Sleep at my place," David offered. "My couch is big."

Sam hesitated.

"I have beer," David added.

Sam laughed despite himself. "I'll be fine. Go on, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Early, okay?" David said.

"Early," Sam agreed.

Sam ventured down the long hall to the master bedroom only to retrieve a blanket and pillow, which he dragged back to the couch. He felt safer there, and thought it must be the proximity to the refrigerator that made it seem so.

At 2:15 am his phone buzzed.

"I thought you might still be awake," David said.

"I wasn't."

"Listen to this: he used the winch."

Sam put his feet on the floor and his forehead in his palm.

"The winch in the garage," David continued. "And the pulleys. He lowered – get this – a grappling hook on the end of a chain. He left it down there for days at a time. He was trolling."

Sam heard pages rustling over the line.

"Then he caught Evelyn," David said. "She got tangled up in the chain. She wasn't Evelyn at first though – she was just a bunch of hard clay shaped like a person. He only named her Evelyn later. Are you hearing this?"

"Have you been up all night?"

"I don't sleep much."

"What else?"

"That's all. I thought you'd want to know."

"I do. But maybe stop reading until tomorrow."

"Right," David said. Then hung up.

Knowing he wouldn't sleep again, Sam inserted a tape, then went to the kitchen for a glass of milk and whatever pizza remained. He was eating hard crusts when Kurricke's familiar voice spoke from the living room.

"This one stops it," the magician said. "I've showed you this before. You know how this works."

Sam spat a mouthful of crust into the trash and went to the doorway. The television showed a

steady shot of the basement and the open hatch.

Kurricke shuffled into view, only it wasn't the magician Sam had come to recognize. This man's hair had fallen out in patches. His skin was waxy, and he moved stiffly, every step an effort.

Positioning himself beside the hatch, he turned toward the camera. It became immediately apparent that something was wrong with his face. His muscles were rigid, the skin nearly perfect in its smoothness. Holding up his hands, he displayed fingers sealed together.

There he stood a long moment, his intent forgotten. Then he pawed at the buttons of his shirt with useless hands.

"Help me," he said, looking up at the camera.

Giving up on the buttons, the magician advanced until he moved out of the shot. For a long while there was only the sound of rustling clothing, labored breathing, and urgent whispers.

When Kurricke hobbled back into view he was naked. His skin everywhere was glossy and hairless. He had lost his sex. He – or someone – had fixed a weighted belt around his hips.

"My final act," the magician informed the camera as he knelt beside the hatch with difficulty. "Into the heart of the matter, yes? To the core of it. I will – if I am able – return. We have worlds to create."

Tipping forward, Kurricke disappeared with a muted splash.

Barely breathing in the resulting silence, Sam watched the onscreen hatch. Something bumped the camera, and Sam jumped, having forgotten that someone else watched with him. He sat forward, waiting to see if she would show herself. The camera shifted again, lifted off its support. The basement leaned and whirled, then blackness.

Sam paused the tape and sat in the quiet half-light of the living room. A board creaked in a back room. A window rattled. Sam got up to make sure the door to the basement was shut securely, then retreated back to the couch. He wanted to be gone from the house, but the distances seemed too great, the empty spaces between himself and everywhere else too threatening. He started the tape rewinding, and pulled the blanket up to his chin. He told himself he

would wait for dawn, then leave and never come back, but he was asleep before the tape reached the beginning. He woke briefly when it started again. The glow from the television, coupled with the gentle click and whir of the camera, offered comfort, so he muted the volume and let it play.

Somewhere in a half-dream, a door opened.

She was standing near the television when Sam woke, transfixed by Kurricke's old familiar act playing out in silence. Her wig was crooked, her dress backward and inside-out. Sam's first thought was that someone had reclaimed limbs from the dumpster and assembled the parts in his living room as a horrid joke. Then she moved.

Sam threw off his blanket and scrambled over the back of the couch. He quelled his panic as she turned her whole body to face him.

Her time away from the magician had been unkind to her. Peels of thick skin had dried, cracked, and were curling from her face and arms. Her eyes were something out of a taxidermist's kit. With rusted effort, she bent an arm to waist-level, and aimed it toward the television by rotating her upper body. Her head tilted to one side in a mechanical gesture of inquiry.

"He's gone," Sam said.

Her eyes remained on the set, following Kurricke as he capered about throwing colored scarves into the air. Reluctant to draw her attention again, Sam watched her watching the magician. She was not quite still; her arms moved in tiny increments, as though desiring to mime Kurricke's abundant gestures.

"You're Evelyn," Sam said.

Her head twisted toward him. Her mouth, which Sam had thought hardened shut, parted to emit a throaty choking. She lifted both arms in a gesture of supplication. Her fingers were fixed together, her wrists immobile. Arms thus raised, she lurched forward.

It was 6:00 am when David's Jeep swung onto the quiet street and threw itself into the driveway. Sam rose from where he had been sitting on the curb across the street and went to meet him.

"What happened?" David asked as he stepped down from the Jeep.

They found Evelyn's body at the bottom of the basement stairs. One of her arms had broken off, and her left leg was folded back at the knee. Using her one arm, she had dragged herself a few feet toward the closed hatch. Now, her hand scrabbled feebly at the floor, and her legs moved with the futile motions of a crushed animal. At the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Evelyn lifted her head to emit strangled, tongueless glottals. If they were efforts to communicate, her capacity to speak was more primitive than her body.

Standing over her, Sam felt himself beginning to loathe her for being so wounded, for clinging to life in a place she'd never belonged, for this suffering that made him feel he had done her some terrible wrong. He hated her for needing so much, and for being so far beyond help. He looked up to see David still on the top stair.

"I'm going to need your help," Sam warned him. He went to plug in the standing halogens, and garish light crushed back the shadows. When he pulled up the hatch, Evelyn began to make different sounds, a high keening broken by abrupt consonants and sharp barks. He went back to stand over her with David, where he saw that she was trying to touch the diver's sandaled feet.

They could see into her torso from where her arm had broken off at the shoulder. She was full of an airy, sponge-like webbing. She would be light. Sam didn't really need help at all. He just didn't want to do it alone.

He took Evelyn under the shoulders, and waited for David to lift her legs. She was still twisting weakly when they fed her through the hatch. She listed, her dress fanning out to tangle her remaining limbs. In slow, dreamlike turns she moved. An arm rose from the water, trailing the sopping fabric of her dress like weeds. Sam couldn't tell, but she seemed to be grasping for the ledge.

He fetched a shovel to hold her under.

Long after she had sank into blackness, Sam remained, unsure of what to expect next. After a while, he closed the hatch and spun the hand-wheel until it locked. He wiped his face on his sleeve. When he turned to thank David – to tell him that he should leave now, and not come back – he found himself already alone.

In the days that followed, Sam read each of Kurricke's notebooks. He ordered them chronologically as best he could, then read them again. He studied them. In time, he began to understand what Kurricke had done right, and where he had gone wrong. He learned from the magician's mistakes, and resolved not to repeat them.

One day he read:

The hatch was never necessary. Egress can be found anywhere. There have always been so many other ways: paintings and music and books. Books, most of all. There are doors to be found everywhere, and where they do not already exist, we create them. We engender worlds so blithely, then abandon them to their own misery. We care so little because it is not we who suffer for our recklessness.

I have heard it argued that God became human so that none could accuse Him of being unsympathetic to His own creation. He walked a mile, as they say. What must we become, then, to understand Him? Where does our mile begin, and where end? God descended, and still loved. Is the same required of us?

We accuse God of neglect, but are we kinder to our own creations? Or to any living thing unfortunate enough to find itself subject to our dominion? We hypocrites shake our fists at Heaven. But if we had a world to create, and a people to rule, could we do better?

Sam closed the journal and looked at its frayed cover. He had been using the picture of the magician and Evelyn to keep his place, but removed it now. "I can do better than you, J. Kurricke," Sam said. He ripped the photograph in half, keeping only Evelyn.

David returned to the house on Enfield three weeks later. The rented dumpster was gone, and the lawn unkempt. No one answered his knocking. The garage door complained at being opened, but the door to the house had been left unlocked.

"Sam!" he called.

Getting no answer, David stepped inside, and his shoe squelched on waterlogged carpet. He noticed then the sagging ceiling and the water-

blistered walls. The air was dense with moisture. On the magician's trunk, David found a composition notebook bloated with water damage. Two-thirds of the pages were filled with script ruined by water. Only the final page remained legible.

The Outsider had been gone many years when the children of the village began telling stories of a tall stranger living beside the river. He had eyes full of light, and charmed them with gifts of honeycomb and pearls. The men and women of the village – search as they might – could find no trace of him, and soon understood that they would not until he willed it.

Every night of that vibrant summer, Evelyn went alone to the riverbank to wait for him, until one evening she arrived to find him emerging from the shallows. His shoulders were like the bull's, and his eyes like the stars. His smile was kind.

"You are Evelyn," he said to her.

"And by what name do I call you, Samael?"

"Here, you will know me as Samael."

Evelyn knelt before him.

Samael took her fragile chin in his hand and turned her face upwards. "You were but a girl when I left."

"But I am a woman now, Samael."

And so Samael became her king, and she his queen. In time, he shared with her all the wonders of that world, which were his to command.



Greg studied theology without purpose before stumbling into a career in information technology, which he hopes to someday stumble out of. He is often mistaken for Gage Kurricke, with whom he co-authored *Gideon's Wall*. His work can be found in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*.





KEN ALTABEF

IL TEATRO OSCURO

The old man's back aches. This is not unusual, despite his having the best seat in the house. Third balcony, directly center stage, a seat which still clings to some fair portion of crushed red-velvet cushion where the brass studs haven't yet chewed through.

But this does not matter. All thought of worldly concerns, discomforts or otherwise, fade quickly to obscurity, abandoned in rapt contemplation of the spectacle unfolding on the stage.

Such is the spell of Dolorma Dolobrigeda. With her flawless ivory complexion and eyes blazing verdigris beneath heavy arching mascara, she is absolutely glorious in her signature role as Kalendora, the exotic feline princess of Racetti's 'Excerpts From a Shadowy World'. Her charms are without number – the saucy curl to her lips, the ferociously regal manner with which she tilts her head – she need not even open her mouth to sing the part. She was simply born to the role. Opposite the skeletal diva, the bulbous form of Pignateggi, an alto tenor whom the old man had always considered tiresome and over-rated, attacks his role with perverse gusto. He scowls gamely behind the black half-mask and enormous nose of Pulcinella, the tragic clown, adding emphasis with sudden flicks of his head which jab the sharply-pointed fool's cap at the audience like a deadly rapier. He holds his jeweled baton upraised in grand gesture, his hand artfully contorted into the three-fingered claw of Pulcinella.

But wait. Something is wrong. Pignateggi's complexion is off. The old man lowers his glittering opera glasses.

Now laid bare to the eye, the interior of the opera house has lost all glamour and spectacle. The cupola is stripped of its shimmering gilt and massive crystal chandelier, the balconies decrepit and carpeted with dust, the empty stage slanted like the prow of a sinking ship.

Gone the splendid costumes, the richly embroidered draperies, gone all flamboyance and pretension to elegance, banished the gorgeous pageantry of fairy tale brought to life above the flickering footlights. All now, empty echoes and dust. No matter, thinks the old man. In an instant he will be transported again to the packed house, surrounded by the opulent, gold-plated architecture of the Teatro, amidst a roomful of operaphiles sporting their Sunday best, hanging in expectant silence as an elaborately costumed Dolobrigeda strides confidently across the stage ready to connect heart and soul with her admiring audience.

With a fidget here and a gentle nudge there he sets about adjusting the complex thumbscrews of the oculars, dropping a slightly mauve filter over the lenses and tweaking the focus. He wants

Pignateggi as plump and pink and as strikingly off-key as he remembered him in his prime, so many years ago. Satisfied with his refinements, he returns his attentions to the world on the other side of the lenses where the play resumes at the precise moment it had left off.

But wait again. Now there is a sound that does not belong.

The old man once more lowers his fantastic glasses. The source of the discordant thumping noise is a stocky fellow, a workman judging by his patched elbows and paint-stained trousers. He is standing in the empty orchestral pit. He kicks resolutely at the bottom of the stage, testing its supports while glancing appraisingly at the vast dimensions of the ceiling and back down again. As the workman's probing attention methodically circles the theatre, he finds the old man.

"Hey, you!" calls the workman.

The old man folds the opera glasses into the crease of his shabby coat as the other storms his way up the aisle, demanding to know what he is doing there.

"Sitting," says the old man. "Watching. I come here often. I disturb nothing."

"You'll have to leave."

"But..." says the old man slowly, his tone sinking with his disappointment. "But we haven't even had the second aria yet."

The workman scowls. "Don't be a fool. Get out and don't come back. She's to be torn down tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"Not soon enough. After all, she's nothing but an eyesore. The governor signed the demolition order months ago, and if we don't get the foundation for the new railway station laid down before the summer rains, it'll be my job."

The workman's disgruntled tirade makes little impression on the old man, but neither had it been meant to. Thinking simplicity might do a better job, he jerks a thumb toward the exit. "Out!"

The old man struggles up from his seat. "I see," he says.

He gathers up his hat and umbrella and makes his way outside. It's slow going for the old man, along cobblestones slick with moisture in

advance of the storm. Every so often autumn's bluster sends a chill blast of wind against him, half forcing him back up the street. It will soon be growing dark, and it is not particularly safe on the streets at night. More than a few street lamps have burned out between the Teatro and his apartment house, the gaps casting deep shadows after sunset, the type of shadows that draw malicious figures in the night.

The old man sighs, but a sigh is not nearly enough. It seems to him the town is in its death throes. Years ago, before the war, this had been a thriving center of trade, a nascent pinnacle of unique and lively culture where anything was possible. Such things as street thieves and bands of spiteful youths had not been a problem. Now the streets are choked with dust and strewn with wandering bits of dirty paper, the buildings and edifices on the verge of crumbling, the people dispirited and broken.

Stymied beneath the weight of such a global disenchantment, the old man pauses in the town square. Unlike Trevi or the Fontana del Tritone, here the central fountain is poorly preserved and indifferently cared for. Pivotal to its grand design is an ancient statue featuring wild-haired Orestes, a favorite of Augustus at the end of his reign. Pitted and cracked by time and inevitable weather, the fountain has long outlived its master. Over the years Orestes has acquired one trouser leg of creeping ivy and even worse, his manly chest stood defaced with scrawled graffiti. Still, Orestes rages against the dusky sky, arms outstretched as if about to call down some hideous judgment from above. One arm broken off at the elbow, he seems now more like some lowly street performer taking a final bow.

The old man lifts the opera glasses to his face. He pauses to drink in a glance through the wonderful lenses, lingering on the sight of Orestes in his prime of polished marble chiseled to perfection. Both arms raised to the heavens, his intent is a supplication to some higher power, most likely the sun.

The old man follows the statue's ancient gesture skyward. The sun is still there, half hidden behind storm clouds, fighting off the dusk. But dusk would come just the same.

As the old man groans his way up the steps of

his apartment house the building replies in kind, creaking with the wind as if threatening to fold itself over him like a heavy blanket of mortar and brick.

The landlady has a fire waiting in the common room and she sits before it, her knobby fingers working at some piece of her endless stitching. The deathly quiet of the sitting parlour is broken only by the murmuring crackle of the flames. She wears a plain dark gown overlaid with a fringed ivory shawl. Her head still bent to her mending, the old landlady motions him toward the hearth. They had long ago abandoned the need for banal greetings or pleasantries. They had been widowed both on the same day twenty years earlier. Their spouses, standing side by side in the market, were lost to a blast during the bombing of the city at the height of the war. Fate might have drawn them together after that but it did not, at least not in any deeply emotional way. They had grown content with pleasant conversation, passing the time in each other's company when occasion permitted, but it was nothing more.

"They're tearing down the Teatro tomorrow," he says.

"So soon?" she breathes. "Terrible! Oh, but it's just terrible."

He nods in silent agreement, intent on massaging warmth back into his hands.

"Such a wonderful old place years ago," she continues. "I remember many an evening of blissful reverie spent in that hall. But nothing's the same since the war, you know that." In a sudden jab at her sewing, she nearly pricks a finger.

"If only there was something we could do," he says.

The old landlady grunts softly, almost imperceptibly. "If your head wasn't always lost in the clouds, you'd have signed that petition."

"Petition?" he asks. The concept sounded only vaguely familiar.

"Angelo Todosi has it still. Too late for all that now, I suppose."

"Perhaps it's not too late."

Her shriveled face unwrinkles a bit in surprise. "You're not going back out?" She is able to keep most of the petulance out of her voice, just enough to emphasize that he was not her husband, that it was not her concern if the old fool

caught his death of cold. The old man shrugs on his coat.

"Suit yourself," she says. She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, but makes only a dry, withered sound. "I'll leave the embers up."

She turns away, directing her attention to feeding a few more sticks to the sputtering fireplace.

At the doorway he draws out the opera glasses, hazarding only one quick glance. He sees a young, pretty girl sitting by the fire wearing a sky blue dress, her nut-brown hair loosely bound up in an emerald green ribbon. Carefree, she sits humming a tune to her rag doll. It is a melancholy song, perhaps one she had invented herself.

The door creaks behind him.

Outside, the old man recoils against the bite of the cold. A swirl of delicate flakes drift lazily groundward, in no great hurry to set down, the first reluctant fall of the season. It is fully dark now, but the way the thin patina of snow on the street throws back the moonlight makes it paradoxically seem to be growing lighter.

The old man trudges on toward the doomed theatre, the expanse of empty street drawn even more dreary under the light dusting of snow. He is unable to keep away thoughts of all that has been lost, so casually ripped away by time and circumstance. In slow circles, his fingers trace the contours of the miraculous opera glasses concealed beneath his greatcoat. He had found the device inside the Teatro itself, secreted in a hidden panel in one of the box seats at the top of the Dress Circle. The glasses were both a gift and a mystery, with only one clue. By means of a mint mark stamped into the brass undercasing, the old man had traced the device to Itzack Mittencluck, a 19th Century Austrian watchmaker of some small renown. Mittencluck was himself a mysterious figure, his life a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces included a wealthy German patron of high station, an enraged Archbishop, no less than three amorous widows, and a secret society of Victorian technophiles. Suspected of spying for Bonaparte, he was eventually hung from the neck until dead for crimes of treason.

The old man stands stock still in the street, prey to a paralyzing dose of wretched emotion, a melancholy which only a look through the

glasses might assuage. He cannot resist and for a moment the street is restored, the snow bright and clean, and at its end he sees the Teatro as it was, resplendent and magnificent again. But, so wholly preoccupied with this splendid vision of the past, he does not see the gang of youths who have come suddenly upon him.

They are shouting, mocking him in a dialect he can not hope to understand. Their intent clear enough, they have their hands roughly upon him, tearing his pockets at the seams.

"I have nothing," he says, his only thought to protect his one treasure, the magnificent opera glasses, as they riffle through his coat. For an instant he stands face to face with the leader of the gang, but only for an instant. Long enough to mark the lean, wolfish cast of his features, full of the supreme arrogance of youth which requires of itself no justification for its actions, no matter how extreme. Where there should have been respect there is only contempt, and beneath that a desperation born of a struggle for uncertain survival. The wolf is but a cub lost in the woods, forced to make his own way. All of that in an instant, before the youth's frustrated disappointment flares to anger, bringing down a rain of elbows and fists. The glasses are knocked from his hand as the old man stumbles and goes down, absorbing their blows and fiery derision until he can take no more.

He does not know how severe the beating is until he wakes up some time later, face down in the snow. The pain is irrelevant. He has lived with pain. His first concern is for the glasses. He finds them trampled into the mud, but not destroyed. He wipes the muddy slush from the lenses with the palm of a bloodied hand. The numbing cold of the snow tugs at him, making a tempting offer of painless oblivion, but he wants only one thing. A final look.

He is beyond self-pity now; he need not ask why youth must devour the old, the cruel present so hungry for the past. For a long time he has understood why, but understanding does not temper the waves of crushed resignation that batter him like aftershocks of the terrible beating he has endured.

It is not far to the Teatro, even on hands and knees.

One last, long look. That was what he wanted, and he takes it, gazing with the stubbornness of a powerful dream. He finds himself whistling an old operetta he had himself composed almost fifty years ago. He recalls sitting up long into the night, wife and children fast asleep in their beds, as he conceived and wrote the music, reveling in the joy of inspiration and the magic of creation. The notes run high and low and then higher again, the refrains constructed as a sort of spiral stair. The old man falters along the way. The upper range is beyond him now; he can no longer go that high. He never will again.

"So soon," he says.

When the workmen come in the morning to bring down the Teatro they find the old man frozen where he sat, stone cold, a rime of frost across his brow like a crusty diadem. He clutches the broken optical to his chest. One of the workers has such a fright, he falls down backwards into the drift, muttering and cursing.

They find also the old theatre, completely transformed. The grand dome of the palais is restored to its pristine state, its ornaments of

silver and brass catching the stray sunlight, precious materials stripped from the facade during times of war, miraculously returned. The interiors are similarly rejuvenated, from plush carpet to high-domed ceiling, from the grandiose two-tiered lobby to the stagehand's makeshift broom closet, to the fading echoes of the last curtain call. Clearly, this place will not be torn down.

Back at the apartment house the last embers fade in the grate, untended.

No one had witnessed a young girl wearing a blue dress emerge from the theatre the night before, an emerald green ribbon fluttering in her hair as she skipped down the street. Apparently, the old landlady had been drawn to the Teatro late that evening as well, having gone inside for one last look.

Ken's short fiction has appeared numerous times in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, plus also *Abyss & Apex*, *Buzzymag*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Unsettling Wonder* and *Crimson Fog*. *Way of the Shaman*, his five-part series of epic fantasy novels, is published by Blueberry Lane Books. You can preview this work and others at the author's website www.wayoftheshamanonline.com.

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ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

TECHNARION

SEAN McMULLEN



As monsters go, I am not at all typical. I have killed hundreds, but my motives were good. There is a lot more killing to be done, probably more than even I can manage. Then again, I might become an even greater monster and give up. Humans probably deserve what is to come, and I no longer care. After all, I am not a typical human either.

In the spring of 1875 I was a bright and innocent young man with good prospects. Although steam was the foundation of every branch of industry, I had chosen to study electricity when I had entered the mechanics institute. By chance I had been given a good education, and this had kept me out of the mills and the mines.

I never suspected that it would also make me immortal.

My introduction to James Kellard was dramatic in the extreme. I worked for Telegraphic Mechanisms, a company which supplied equipment to the telegraph industry. While I was well known and widely respected as an outstanding tradesman, it was not the sort of respect that got one admitted to the Royal Society.

I had just arrived at my workbench one morning when Merric, my overseer, entered with a man of perhaps fifty. He was dressed in one of the newly fashionable lounge suits, and the top hat that he wore declared him to be a man of quality. He had a military bearing, and there was an old scar across his left cheek.

"Lewis, I want you to meet Mr Kellard," Merric babbled nervously, not really sure of the protocols used in genteel society. "Mr Kellard, this is Lewis Blackburn."

I had stood up by now. Kellard offered me his hand, but without removing his glove. He was being familiar, but not too familiar. In 1875, this was the way things were done.

"Mr Kellard wishes to discuss some problems of electro-mechanics," Merric continued.

"I can't do that, begging your pardon, sir," I said, addressing Kellard. "The terms of my employment –"

"No longer matter," said Kellard. "I have just bought Telegraphic Mechanisms. You may leave us, Mr Merric."

As introductions go, it certainly secured my attention. Telegraphic Mechanisms was not a small company, and financially it was on good times. Kellard said no more until Merric was out of earshot.

"Do you know of me?" he asked, bending over to examine a switch on my workbench.

"No sir," I replied, as deferential as if I were standing before the queen.

"I doubled my fortune by being first to spot

trends in the marketplace. Just now I happen to know that electrical switches will gain me great advantage, so I am buying companies that build them."

"I can build whatever –" I began.

"Please, hear me out," said Kellard politely, but his tone told me to just shut up and listen. "This is Birmingham, and I need my switches made in London. I only bought *this* firm to secure your services, Mr Blackburn. Can you move to London today?"

The only sensible answer to that question was yes, yet that was not my answer.

"I've got a mother and two sisters to support," I said.

"I shall double your salary, your mother and sisters will want for nothing. What do you say?"

"Double!" I exclaimed. "Sir, how can I thank you enough?"

"You could give me an answer, yes or no."

"Yes sir, yes. Yes with all my heart."

I travelled with Kellard on the train to London that same day, in the luxury of a first class carriage. I felt guilty about even sitting down, the upholstery was too rich, the seats too soft and welcoming. It was only in the privacy of this carriage that Kellard began to speak of my new duties.

"I am having a machine built," he explained. "It is a huge, highly secret machine, so an absolute minimum number of people may know of it. I have heard that you are brilliant with circuits, and are worth ten ordinary workers."

"Someone's been exaggerating, sir."

"I hope not, because you will be doing enough work for ten. I need someone with unparalleled skill in the logic of switches and relays, and a grasp of mathematics."

"What's the machine to do?" I asked.

"See into the future."

For a moment I was tempted to laugh. One of the richest men in the country had said something ludicrous. Was it meant to be a joke? I decided not to laugh.

"So...it's a time machine?" I asked.

"No, it is more of a time telescope. Now no more questions until we reach my factory."

Everyone has heard of the wonders of London, but I did no sightseeing on that first day. One of Kellard's people was waiting at the station with a hansom cab, and we were driven through the crowds and traffic with the shutters down. We stopped at a factory beside the Thames. It was empty, yet there were men guarding it. Whatever Kellard was building was at a very early stage. He took me inside, and led me up the stairs to a mezzanine floor, then we continued up a cast iron spiral staircase to the roof.

"Look around, Mr Blackburn, what do you see?" Kellard asked.

I saw slate tiles and iron guttering, all grubby with soot. Off to one side, some bricklayers were building four chimneys. Their work looked nearly complete.

"It's just a roof, sir," I said, holding onto my cap in the wind. "There's four flagpoles with no flags, but they're hung with...insulators, and wire! The poles support insulated wires."

"Splendidly observed," said Kellard. "What does that mean to you?"

"It's some sort of telegraph?"

"Close, Mr Blackburn, very close. Follow me."

We descended back into the factory. Immediately beneath the roof, on the mezzanine floor, was a small office guarded by two men. Kellard escorted me inside. The man seated at the workbench was small and wiry, and had mutton chop whiskers and thinning hair. The stare behind his spectacles was rather like that of an owl who had just caught sight of a mouse – intense, darting, but controlled. I had only ever seen him from the back of lecture halls, but even so I knew his face.

"Dr Flemming, I would like you to meet Lewis Blackburn," said Kellard.

"Mr Blackburn, good, good," said Flemming. "Your name was at the top of my list."

I was so awestruck that I hardly knew what to say. I mumbled something about being honoured to meet him.

"Please, no social pleasantries," he said briskly. "They are for fools with nothing better to do. I have been conducting experiments into wireless telegraphy, Maxwell's equations show it's possible in theory. As always, practice is another matter."

"Do you know what a working wireless telegraph would mean?" asked Kellard.

"No more wires strung across the country," I replied. "Thousands of pounds saved."

"Millions," said Kellard.

"Lightning produces electromagnetic discharges, what I call radiative waves," Flemming continued. "Using the great wire loop on the roof I am able to detect these waves, even when the thunderstorms are over the horizon. What do you think of that?"

"It proves theory," I said slowly. "Have you built a transmitter too?"

I was being cautious, and was acutely aware that I was being tested and assessed. If I had just gasped with wonder, I would have been put on the first train back to Birmingham, in a third class carriage. Kellard might have been my fairy godmother, but unlike Cinderella, I had to prove that I knew some very advanced electrical theory.

Flemming cleared his throat and glanced at Kellard, who took the cue.

"At first I ordered Dr Flemming to suspend work on the transmitter, and refine the receiver," he said. "There would be a large and immediate demand for storm detection devices aboard ships. Imagine his surprise when he detected Morse code as well as thunderstorms."

I was astounded. Kellard paused. I was expected to say something intelligent.

"So wireless telegraphy has been achieved already?" I asked.

"Indeed," said Flemming. "Here is the proof."

He gestured to the apparatus on the workbench, which consisted of wire coils, metal plates, and other components of glass, wire and crystal. At the centre of all this was a mirror galvanometer. The light beam employed in the instrument was flickering back and forth in a familiar pattern.

"Morse code," I said after staring at it for a moment.

"The signal is being fed down here from the loop on the roof. Please, read a little of the message. It's in English."

I concentrated on the dots and dashes, spelt out by the flickering spot of light. The words *calculetric*, *logical cell*, *addition*, *diodic*, *triodic* and *switch* featured heavily. I do not know how much time passed, but I became oblivious of my surroundings as tapestries of numbers and wires wove themselves in my mind.

"This is the design for a calculation machine of truly epic dimensions," said Flemming. "The specifications are interspersed with prices from the London Stock Exchange. Prices for the next day, and they are always right."

I looked up at once. So this was the time telescope that Kellard had mentioned. It was a machine to calculate trends and probabilities faster and better than any human could.

"Not enough data for a man to make a big profit, just a little, to show what can be done," said Kellard. "Mr Blackburn, would you like to tell us what you think is happening here?"

This was yet another test, and I fought with my nerves. One of the richest men in Britain and our greatest authority on electrical design were standing before me, checking how I measured up.

"Some British company has invented and built what they call a calculectric, as well as a wireless telegraph," I said slowly, choosing every word with care. "Charles Babbage may have secretly designed the calculectric for them before he died, and Maxwell himself may be managing their radiative equipment as we speak. They want to keep the design a secret, but need more such machines built at scattered locations. They don't trust the privacy of the postal or telegraph systems, so they are using wireless telegraphy to communicate. They think that nobody else can detect radiative signals. The design is interspersed with predictions from the stock exchange, so that others may test and calibrate their calculectrics as they build them."

"The message takes two months, then it is repeated," said Flemming. "How do you account for that?"

"Several machines may be at different stages of construction."

"We intend to build our own calculectric in secret," said Kellard. "We will call it a technarion. Why?"

"Secrecy. Technarion is a neutral name, it betrays nothing about function."

Kellard looked to Flemming. "Well?" he asked.

"He's perfect," said Flemming.

Kellard went across to a blackboard that was mounted on one wall. Chalked on it were several circles joined by lines, but it was not a circuit diagram.

"This top circle represents myself," he explained. "Beneath me are Security Chief Brunton, Research Manager Flemming, and the Foreman of Engineering. Beneath the last named are three electrical engineers, who will visit the contract workshops where the logical cells will be made, then wire them together in this factory. Can you do the job?"

"Once I learn my way around London, aye."

"No, no, I mean you to be Foreman of Engineering."

It took me just days to build the first logical cell, using the telegraphic instructions. Soon there were dozens being produced every week across the city. Kellard had four steam engines installed to drive magneto-electric generators, then he partitioned off the interior of the factory, so that only from the mezzanine level could one have an overview of the technarion. Six months after Flemming discovered the signal, the technarion came to life. Powered by the four generators, the one thousand and twenty-four cells of the machine did their first calculation.

Words cannot convey what it was like to gaze down on the machine from the mezzanine balcony. There were rows of high wooden bookshelves, each filled with hundreds of logical cells. Overhead frames supported the wires that connected the cells, and held fans to disperse the heat. The clatter from the relays and switches was like a thousand tinkers all gathered under one roof and hammering away together. A huge display board of platinum filament lamps showed the status of the machine. If any lamp went out, it flagged a fault in some part of the technarion. Just three men actually worked in the technarion, one watching for faults and making repairs, and two installing new cells.

The purpose of the machine was shared only between Kellard, Flemming and myself. Even the security chief did not know what secrets he was protecting from hostile eyes and ears. As the months went by the technarion was expanded, and expanded again. I modified the operating list to run four thousand and ninety-six cells, and its calculations began to prove useful in predicting stock exchange trends. Kellard started to make a lot of money, and I tasted champagne

for the first time on the day that the technarion's earnings exceeded the cost of its construction. The trouble was that it took too long to feed in the instructions, and delays like this meant investment opportunities missed. Kellard told me to find a solution, and to spare no expense.

Thus I advertised for a typist. Skilled typists were not common in 1875, but four of the candidates showed promise. I had them come to the factory, where I had set up one of the new Remington typewriters. This I had modified very heavily, so that it punched patterns of holes into a roll of paper to represent letters and numbers. These could be read into the technarion by means of an array of electric brush switches.

The first three men were good, but not as good as I had hoped. Mistakes were difficult to correct, and involved gluing a strip of paper over the area and punching new holes by hand. The person I hired would be the one who could balance speed of typing with accuracy. McVinty was accurate but slow. Caraford finished in half McVinty's time but made more mistakes. I calculated that Sims was the best compromise, after I factored in the time to correct his mistakes. I was not inclined to even test Landers, the fourth candidate, because the process took two hours. I walked over to the waiting room to say as much - and discovered that Elva Landers was a woman.

Typing was a man's occupation in 1875, so I had not dreamed that a woman might apply. She was perhaps twenty, and was well dressed without being at the fashion forefront. She also wore a silver locket on a chain, and this was inscribed with some exquisite, flowing script, probably bought on a holiday in Egypt or Morocco. Women were said to be more patient and steady with some jobs, and I wondered if the new field of typing might be one of them. I decided to test her after all.

I was doing a short course called *The Art of Refined Conversation* at a college teaching social graces to newly rich tradesmen. I reasoned that I would be taken more seriously if I sounded like a gentleman, now that I had a gentleman's income. The lecturer had told us never to open a conversation by commenting on the weather, or asking newcomers what they thought of Lon-

don. I was almost at a loss to think of anything else, however.

"I can't place your accent," I said as I fitted a paper roll into the Remington. "Is it Welsh?"

"No, I'm American," she said guardedly. "I grew up in New York."

"New York! Why did you come to London?"

"I was living in Paris, learning French and taking piano lessons, when my father's railway company went broke. He wanted me to return to New York and marry for money. I decided to make my own way in the world."

All of that made sense. Her familiarity with the use of a keyboard probably came from her piano lessons. She was very pretty, in a classical sort of way, and had a bold but awkward manner. This meant that she stood out in polite London society, but I could imagine people saying 'It's all right, she's American,' and making allowances for her.

The first typewriters were not as you see them today. The letters struck upwards against the paper on the platen so that gravity would pull them back down. That meant the typist could not see what had been typed until the platen had been turned for the next line. I had replaced the platen with a row of cells for punching holes. With so much depending on my first impressions of her, Miss Landers frowned with concentration and struck the keys with hard, confident strokes, like a tinker repairing a kettle. When she had finished, I removed the paper roll for checking. After a few minutes I looked up and shook my head.

"How did I do?" she asked, giving me a very anxious little frown.

"Fastest time," I replied, "but that's not the wonder of it. You made no mistakes. None. At all. I'm astounded."

"Well, you know how it is. We girls have to be that much better than men to do the same job."

"You're hired, Miss Landers. Can you start tomorrow?"

I lived at a rooming house. This was also owned by Kellard, and all of his employees were obliged to reside there. The managers lived on the top floor, where we each had a comfortable suite of rooms. Everyone was single, from man-

ager to stoker, and were sworn to maintain the highest standards of secrecy.

I was sitting by the fire in my dressing gown, reading, when the door, that I had locked with a key, was opened. Brunton was standing in the doorway. He was thick set without being fat, a slab of muscle who could enter any fight and be confident of winning. Because he was intimidating in size and manner, people deferred to him. Thus he was a good leader, rather like a sergeant major in the army. After glancing about for a moment, he sauntered into my room.

"What's the meaning of this?" I demanded.

"Secrecy inspection," he replied.

"Secrecy inspection? Who the hell has the right to do that?"

"Just mind your tongue," said Brunton. "If you want to talk, talk to Mr Kellard. There's been people tattling lately. They tattled in taverns and brothels, about amazing things in the mill. They're gone now."

"You mean fired?"

"Gone, Mr Blackburn. Now you know some secrets nobody else knows. If those secrets get out, it could only be you who sold 'em."

"I'd never dream of betraying Mr Kellard."

Brunton looked around the room, then examined some photographs pinned to the wall.

"You're a photographer, I'm told."

"Yes."

"Slums, mills, railway stations, trains... Why don't you photograph something grand like Saint Paul's or Parliament?"

"Saint Paul's and Parliament will still be here in a hundred years, the slums and steam trains will not. I want people to remember that the wonders of the future were built on the miseries and grime of the past."

"What wonders?"

"Well...I think trains and horses will be gone, and people will get about in their own electric carriages."

Brunton turned to me, drew a pistol from his coat and drew back the striker. The barrel was aimed at my forehead.

"You just told a secret about the future," he said with a cruel and twisted smile. "I could go out and invest in companies what make electric horses. Mr Kellard wouldn't like that."

He fired. The bullet passed close to the side of my head before continuing on into the back of my chair. The shot was a warning to behave, and that he was not to be trifled with. Two of his bully boys entered my room, seized me by the arms and dragged me out of the chair.

"The shot, it will bring the police," I warned.

"The police won't help, neither," said Brunton. "We got friends in the police."

He hit me five times before his men released me, and I fell to the floor. He had not needed to hit me, I think he just enjoyed it.

"You hired some slut today and showed her secret stuff in the factory," said Brunton. "I got people watching her. It's hard, like because she's not staying here. Now you gotta make her move in here and keep an eye on her. Always. If any secrets gets out, you're both in the shit."

The following morning I went straight to Kellard's office, with a punched paper roll in my hands. I was in a fury, but I made a point of keeping my words polite. That was just as well. Although the rich and powerful no longer dressed in armour and settled disputes by the sword, I was about to find out that they still had the power of life and death over the likes of myself. Kellard heard me out quietly, then sat forward with his hands clasped on his desk.

"The three typists that you did not hire are dead," he said calmly. "They saw secrets inside the factory, and I'll not tolerate that."

After about fifteen seconds I realised that I was standing there with my mouth open. He had killed them. My employer was a murderer. My life was in his hands.

"Very good, sir," I finally mumbled.

"I'm confident that you will do my work and preserve my secrets, because one telegram from me could send some cold and brutal men to visit your mother and sisters within about half an hour."

"I understand, sir."

"Now give me one good reason why I should not have your American typist killed."

I have a talent for quickly recovering from shock and devising coherent answers. I pushed this talent to the very limit.

"Because without her, the technarion is crip-

pled," I said. "Examine this."

I had intended to slam the paper roll down on Kellard's desk, but it now seemed wise to put it down slowly and gently.

"Explain," he said, unrolling the paper a little and staring at the rows of punched holes.

"The technarion is more complex than any other machine in the history of the world. It has to be reconfigured with instructions every time you want it to perform a different task. That takes me up to a week."

"I know, you told me. I told you to find a solution."

"Miss Landers took twenty minutes to type this configuration roll. The best of the men took an hour, and made ninety-one mistakes. Add an hour for me to do the checking. Each mistake would have to be corrected manually, taking two hours and a half in total. Allow a day for the glue on the patches to dry, and you have twenty-eight and one half hours to prepare a roll of instructions ready for use. Miss Landers typed a roll error free and ready for use over eighty-five times faster than can be managed with the best of the male typists, and two hundred and fifty times faster than me. If time is money, that is a lot of money saved."

Kellard took another hour to make up his mind. This included a discussion with Fleming and a demonstration of my paper roll instruction reader. I suspect that he had decided to spare Miss Landers after my initial explanation, but it is important for men like him not to lose face in front of men like me. He led me back up to his office.

"Now listen carefully," he said sternly as he closed the door. "Every day people are murdered in London in disputes over a shilling or two. The secrets in this factory are worth over a million pounds a year. Draw the obvious conclusion. I have the power of life and death over my employees, Mr Blackburn, and the police are in my pay. You wanted a typist, well now you have her. You will not let her out of your sight. When outside this factory she will speak to nobody but you."

When Elva arrived to start work, I explained that we had to observe conditions of extreme secrecy. To my immense relief,

she agreed to move into Kellard's rooming house at once. I went with her to her hotel, escorted by Brunton, and here she packed her bags while I settled her account.

Back at the factory, we got to work. We quickly dispensed with the more formal forms of address, and called each other Elva and Lewis. Because she typed so fast, she often had nothing to do but read novels and wait for more work. This suited me, because Elva was well above my social status, yet she was also my employee. It was an ideal opportunity to practice polite social banter.

"Folk around here treat you like you're important," she said one afternoon, about three days after she started.

"I suppose I am."

"What do you do, apart from put paper rolls in machines?"

"I design electrical circuits for Mr Kellard. Do you know about electricity?"

"Poppa says it's in lightning, and it makes telegraphs work. Poppa says it's not where the money is, though. He says steam is the future."

"Burning coal to make steam produces a lot of soot, and soot makes the cities filthy," I replied. "It also makes people sick. Electricity is clean."

"Don't you have to burn coal to make electricity?"

That caught me by surprise. Few women knew how electricity was generated.

"Well yes, but you can do that far away from cities, so the smoke blows out to sea. You then use wires to bring the electricity where it's needed, and nobody gets sick. Everyone has a right to clean air."

"Hey, are you one of those society reformers?"

I reminded myself that she was American and being innocently forthright.

"I think you mean socialists."

"Oh, yeah. Poppa warned me about them, but I think you're nice."

That embarrassed me so much that I could not think of any sensible reply. I was not really a socialist, I just believed that everyone had a right to live happily.

"What else did he tell you?" I asked. The lecturer at the college had said that it was better to ask a neutral question than say something stupid.

"He said to watch out for strange men, or I

might get abducted and made a white slave."

"In a way, I suppose that's happened to both of us," I said, trying to make light of our situation. "The secrecy in this place really is a bit extreme."

"I never thought I'd be a slave who had to type."

"It won't be forever. Meantime, just don't gossip about your work."

"I'm gossiping to you, Lewis," she said, then giggled. "Is that allowed?"

"Yes. I already know all the secrets in here."

"What's really going on? Am I allowed to ask?"

I knew that I was treading dangerous ground, but as long as no secrets left the building I felt sure that Kellard would not order us killed.

"Come with me."

I took her to my workshop next door. Here I showed her my code converter.

"This thing changes the holes you punch in paper into pulses of electricity."

"A telegraph operator can do that."

"True, but my device can do it a hundred times faster than a human, over and over again."

"That's impressive, but people can't read that fast. Why bother?"

"I'm afraid you're not allowed to know that."

"I bet it's another machine doing the reading, like a steam train reading a newspaper."

We both laughed aloud at that idea.

"Actually, that's not far off the truth," I admitted. "One day I'll tell you about the technarion. Meantime, are you interested in photography?"

Having Elva with me when I went out photographing London solved a lot of my problems. It meant that I was with her during her leisure hours, acting as her chaperone. I made sure that she did not talk to anyone else about her work, and she only seemed interested in talking to me. I was afraid that she might find the more squalid areas of London rather confronting, yet she came willingly wherever I led. I began to hope that she might be tagging along just to be with me.

"What do you do with your photos, Lewis?" she asked one day as I was setting up to photograph a street in Spitalfields. "I mean, you can't sell them to be made into postcards or anything like that."

"I've done a couple of exhibitions in Birming-

ham, there're slums there too. People who are well off come along and get a view of places they'd never go to otherwise. Maybe next time a social reformer stands for election, they might remember the misery in my photographs, and vote for him so he can do something about it."

"That's great! It's sort of... noble of you."

I did not know how to take compliments. I changed the subject.

"One day I might publish a book of photos, so that people in the future can see how some of us used to live, and not let it happen again."

"Like we remember how Christians were fed to the lions by Romans?"

"That's right. Nobody's been feeding Christians to lions lately, have they?"

Elva laughed. More significantly, she squeezed my arm.

"You're a lovely man, Lewis," she said, looking into my face, her expression suddenly quite serious. "If everyone was like you instead of Poppa, nobody would live in slums."

I nodded but said nothing. She liked me for what I was. This was probably a romantic moment, but I had no experience of romantic moments, or what to do when they happened. Nearby, an old man was singing. I had paid him no attention until now.

*Poverty, poverty, knock,
Me loom keeps sayin' all day.
Poverty, poverty, knock,
Gaffer's too skinny te pay.
Poverty, poverty, knock,
Keepin' one eye on the clock.
An' I knows that I'll guttle,
When I hears me shuttle
Go poverty, poverty, knock.*

"Strange that folk in the slums sing about being miserable," said Elva. "Why don't they sing happy songs to cheer themselves up?"

"Singing about bad times makes them easier to bear," I replied. "They sing a lot where I come from."

"Were your folks poor?"

"Aye. Grandad worked in a mill and earned less than it costs to feed a grand lady's lapdog. Dad was a stoker on a steam train. He died when

the boiler exploded."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

I reached out and squeezed her hand to reassure her, but to my surprise she grasped my fingers and squeezed back. Again she looked me right in the face, the way refined English girls are taught not to. I floundered for words that were appropriate. I could find none. Instead, I said the first words that came into my head.

"The man who owned the rail company was halfway decent. He visited my mother in our tatty little home, to give her some money. He saw me playing some mathematical board game that I'd invented and chalked on the floorboards, and realised that I was very bright. His own son had died of typhus a few months earlier, so he more or less adopted me. I was sent to a good school, then to a mechanics institute to learn a trade. I chose electricity, and here I am."

It was a stupid thing to say in the circumstances, definitely not what a suave and dashing man-about-town would have said to a lady that he wished to impress. To my astonishment, her fingers fluttered up under my chin and drew my face toward hers. She pressed her lips against mine. Some of the nearby children laughed, clapped and whistled.

"Sorry about being so bold, but I *am* American," she said.

"No apology needed, I assure you."

"Anyhow, I've never courted anyone before."

"Really?" I said, still breathless with surprise. "But you lived in Paris. What about all those romantic Frenchmen?"

"They courted *me*, Lewis. I didn't have to do a thing. Well, except to say *Non!* lots of times. I had to work hard for you."

"Oh – ah, sorry. I'm not much of a romantic. You know, too much time spent with wires and batteries."

"That's okay. So what now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do I get to have a romance with you?"

Again my mind began to go blank, but this time I fought back.

"I could think of nothing better," I managed.

They were good words. They were the right words. I felt giddy with relief.

We packed up my camera, and began to walk back toward the rooming house. Elva now had her hand upon my arm. Suitable matches had been presented to me by friends and relatives for years. Some proposals were to settle me with a solid, honest girl who would make a good home. Others sought to match me with girls from families above my station but in reduced circumstances. Love was never involved. Now a sophisticated and intelligent girl had kissed me and proposed a liaison.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see a man keeping pace with us on the opposite side of the street. One of Brunton's bully boy spies, I had learned to spot them by now. What would Kellard and Brunton make of our kiss? They would probably approve. Romantically attached staff would spend less time talking to others.

For no rational reason I suddenly began to panic about what to say next. Did I tell Elva how beautiful she was? That seemed clumsy. So what did sophisticated people talk about? Opera? I had never been to an opera, I had only seen opera songs like 'The Gendarme's Duet' performed in Birmingham's music halls. Anyway, what if she really were a spy? She had already asked about the technarion. I loved her, so how could I keep her safe if she were spying? Questions kept cascading through my mind.

"If you could change the world, would you have machines do all the work?" she asked.

My relief knew no bounds. She had asked my opinion about something innocent.

"There was misery before factories and machines came along," I replied. "No, I just think people should have the right to do work they love, and be paid fairly."

"Do you love what you do?"

"Oh yes, but I'm an exception."

"That's good," said Elva, looking dreamily up into the grey, grubby sky. "I misjudged you, Lewis. My apologies."

"I...don't follow."

"I thought you believed in blind, headlong progress, but you don't. That's important to me, it makes you really special."

"Aye, can't have machines running the world. They might get too smart, and want things that are not good for people."

"Smart machines? Go on!"

"Bad enough having humans fighting humans. Humans fighting machines, would be too much."

"How many smart machines do you know?"

"I'm on first-name terms with a couple."

She giggled and gave me a little push.

"What are you going to do with your life, like after we finish working for Mr Kellard? You will have lots of money saved, and you can't go back to making switches."

"Well, I met a great man called Faraday fifteen years ago, and he was very inspiring. I thought I might attend university and become a scientist, like him."

"What's that?"

"It's a new sort of tradesman, like a philosopher, only practical. Would you like to marry a scientist?"

The words were out of my mouth before my brain could stop them. I bit my tongue to punish it.

"I do believe I would," said Elva.

For me the dark and sooty skies of London suddenly brightened into a glorious, unclouded blue, and my knees went weak with sheer relief.

Brunton was waiting at the entrance to the Brooming house.

"Give your camera gear to Charlie, he'll see it safe," he said, indicating one of the bully boys who was with him. "There's a meeting of managers called."

"But it's Sunday evening."

"When Mr Kellard says bark, you only says woof. Oh, and the typist's to be there too."

"Elva? Why?"

"How's I to know? You lot make the secrets, I only keep 'em."

For Brunton, that was being downright civil. He had never liked me, I being working class made good. Now he was uneasy, and even displaying deference. Something very important had happened, and I was needed. Kellard wanted Elva there, and that could only be if typing was required. If typing was required, it would involve the technarion.

The meeting was in Kellard's office. Brunton and Elva were made to wait outside, while

Kellard, Flemming and I discussed what had happened.

"The radiative signal has changed," Flemming announced. "This afternoon, it stopped repeating the design and started sending something else. New circuits and instructions, I don't know what to make of it."

"If *you* don't, what hope do the rest of us have?" asked Kellard, whose face had turned chalk white.

"Sir, the captain is expected to command the ship, not build it. Mr Blackburn is the master shipwright here."

Flemming handed me a reel of ticker tape. His hand shook and his skin was clammy. He was probably in a blind panic, afraid of Kellard and unable to think clearly.

"There's four hours of message on that. A new reel was fitted twenty minutes ago."

"Did you miss anything?" I asked.

"No, I always save everything from the receiver, in case of something like this. I only noticed the new data when I went to change the paper tape."

"So you've not read this yet?"

"Only a little."

"I'll need an hour or so to scan it."

"We can wait," said Kellard.

As it happened, it was just thirty minutes before I worked out what was now being sent. By then there was paper tape everywhere, marked here and there with paperclips and notes. I cannot say what possessed me, but I decided to be theatrical. Perhaps it was to unsettle the man who had the power of life and death over myself and Elva.

"Security has been breached," I announced.

"What!" demanded Kellard, who then bounded to his feet and made for the door.

"Wait, don't call Brunton," I said, holding up a length of the paper tape. "The culprit is you."

"Me?" gasped Kellard.

"You can't be serious!" exclaimed Flemming.

"I certainly am. The people that we stole the design from have noticed your successes on the London Stock Exchange, Mr Kellard."

"Impossible!" cried Kellard.

"No, no, I think I see what Mr Blackburn is getting at," interjected Flemming. "No human could have made the sorts of brilliant invest-

ment decisions that the technarion calculated."

"So...we're ruined?" asked Kellard, turning to me.

"Not at all, they want us to be partners," I explained. "There are instructions in this message for building a powerful radiative transmitter, and for wiring it directly into the technarion. Your machine will become part of a network of technarions."

"You mean they don't mind that we spied on them and built our own calculation factory?"

"Apparently not."

"Will I lose my monopoly on predicting the stock exchange trends?"

"You may become part of a secret oligarchy that rules British finance, and perhaps Britain itself," suggested Flemming. "That's better than any monopoly."

Kellard needed no more convincing. Brunton was called in and told to fetch all the technical workers for a special night shift at double pay. Flemming started building the radiative transmitter, and Elva began typing new operating instructions for the technarion as fast as I could dictate them. Within a week we had completed the transmitter and a more powerful receiver. I wired them into our technarion. The quality and accuracy of the investment advice and predictions improved at once. We were still not sure who we were dealing with, but it was immensely profitable.

For all his wealth and power, Kellard was an isolated and somewhat lonely man. He could not confide in Flemming for fear of losing face in front of a peer, but I was another matter. He could make ridiculous statements to me, and I would pass them on to Flemming as my own. Flemming was no fool, and was aware of what was happening, yet that was the way Kellard wanted to communicate, so we worked that way.

"Don't you ever feel tempted to profit directly from the technarion's predictions?" Kellard asked one evening, when I went to his office to deliver my daily report. "I know everything about you and your circumstances. You only have a few hundred pounds saved from your wages."

"It takes big money to make big money," I replied. "A poor coal cutter could make no profit

from knowing what the price of coal will be tomorrow, but the mine owner would."

"I'm making a lot of money. Why do people I don't even know want me to be richer?"

"It takes money to rule, Mr Kellard. Like Mr Flemming says, those people mean you to rule with them in secret, using calculation factories like the technarion."

"Does that worry you?"

It actually worried me a great deal, but I was making very good money by developing a calculation factory for Kellard. I could hardly tell him that it was beginning to frighten me more than he did, so I lied. "No. The folk who rule us now allow slums, poverty, dangerous mines and stupid wars. Folk who rule on the advice of machines would not tolerate sick, starving workers, mining disasters or ruinous wars. That all wastes resources and money. If intelligent, logical machines ruled, better for everyone."

"Even if only a few of us were still rich?"

"Aye."

"Strange, I thought everyone wanted to be rich. My father made his fortune in steam, Mr Blackburn. What did your father do?"

"He was a stoker on a train."

"A stoker? That's good, honest work, but poorly paid."

"True."

"My father was rich, but not respected. Blue blooded ninnies kept telling him that for all his wealth he could never be a gentleman. He would reply that he could buy as many gentlemen as he wished, but that just made him more enemies. He died in luxury, in a manor house the size of the queen's palace, yet he was bitter to the end. Respect, Mr Blackburn, he was given no respect. Do you respect me?"

Does a rabbit respect a fox? It was a stupid question that needed an intelligent answer.

"Aye, you get things done. I only despise folk like those aristocrats who fritter their family fortunes away."

Kellard took that as a compliment.

"Most people fear me, but that's not respect. One day I may be prime minister, and then we'll see some changes. I have a plan, Mr Blackburn. The people who invented the electric calculation machines are technically brilliant, but they're not

leaders. I'm a leader, and I'll soon take over their network of technarions, be sure of that. Then I'll lead Britain into greatness and have those lazy upper class parasites digging coal and scrubbing floors. Maybe I'll even hang a few."

This was the dark side of Kellard, and I knew my true feelings could lead me into danger. I steered the conversation to technical matters.

"My report's got an important technical decision for you."

"What? Technical matters are nothing to do with me."

"This one involves a lot of money, sir. Today the ticker tape machine produced instructions to expand the technarion to a hundred and thirty-two thousand logical cells."

Kellard gasped so loudly that one of the guards heard him from outside, and rapped at the door to check that nothing was amiss. Kellard told him to be about his business, then turned back to me.

"The maintenance of such a machine would require dozens of technical men, along with an entire power station to supply its electricity," he said after scribbling some figures down.

"Indeed, sir."

"Why build it? Do we need so much calculation power?"

"Do you need more money?"

"Good point, one can never have enough. Have the cost estimates on my desk tomorrow morning."

That evening I went to the Progress Club, which had recently accepted me as a member. After dinner I ordered a brandy and seated myself by a window that overlooked the Thames. In the distance was Kellard's factory. Lights glowed warmly in the windows, and smoke from the four chimneys was illuminated by London's gas lamps. It was like riding a tiger. Getting off meant being eaten. Staying on meant going wherever the tiger was going. Where was that? Was it worse than being eaten?

My thoughts were interrupted by a waiter, who presented me with a telegram. Within a minute I had sent a clerk to buy me a rail ticket to Birmingham, and was on my way to see Elva at the rooming house. She came out to meet me

in the common room.

"My mother has suffered a heart attack, and is dying," I announced with no preamble at all.

"Lewis, how terrible!" she exclaimed, then put her arms around me. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, but thank you. Just go to work tomorrow. Do whatever typing that Flemming needs."

Next I called upon Brunton. I still disliked the man, but had to defer to him on matters of travel.

"Go to Birmingham?" he said doubtfully. "Don't like it. Could be a trick by Mr Kellard's rivals."

"Damn it man, I could be summoned by the queen to be knighted and you'd say it was a trick by Mr Kellard's rivals."

"Well...I can't spare any guards to go with you. Tell you what, take one of these and I'll sign you out for a day."

One of these was a Webley Bulldog. Although a small pistol, it fired five of those monstrous .45 calibre bullets that leave a large wet crater instead of a hole. I thought it wise not to tell Brunton that I had never fired a gun, in case he changed his mind.

I missed the last train, and slept at the station to be sure of catching the first in the morning. When I arrived in Birmingham, I had yet another shock. My mother was not only alive, she was in good health. Someone had wanted me away from the protection of Brunton's guards, perhaps to abduct me.

Naturally there was a lot of fuss made over me, for I was the local lad made good and I had not been home for some time. After staying longer than I should have, I had a few lads escort me back to the railway station, and here I booked a first class carriage all to myself. Before leaving, I sent a telegram to Brunton, explaining what had happened and asking to be met at the station in London.

I fingered the gun in my coat pocket as I sat waiting for the train, flanked by two burly young men who were currently courting my sisters. Why had I been lured away to Birmingham? Something bad was about to happen, I was sure of it.

"Mr Lewis Blackburn?"

I nodded. The speaker was a balding man who had the sceptical, slightly worried look of an accountant. He was dressed well enough to impress, but not to intimidate.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," I said.

"Hildebrand, James Hildebrand of the accounting firm Hildebrand, Hildebrand and Bogle," he said breathlessly, handing me his card. "My apologies for just barging up to you like this, but I need to speak to you about Mr Kellard."

"Please, feel free."

"Our firm's London office conducts Mr Kellard's investments, I manage the branch in Birmingham. Nobody knew where your mother lived, so I had to wait at the station before each train leaving for London. I must have asked hundreds of men if they were Lewis Blackburn."

"And now you have found me, sir. What is your message?"

Hildebrand mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief that seemed to have had much use that day.

"Mr Blackburn... Could we speak privately?"

"These two lads go wherever I go, I may be in danger. You, sir, may be that very danger."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Wait a moment."

He took out a pocketbook and began scribbling. After a moment he showed me the page.

Kellard has made a series of spectacularly bad investments since you came to Birmingham. In a single day he has lost everything.

"What? Surely you are joking."

"Actually he's lost more than everything, he's bankrupt," said Hildebrand.

"The devil you say."

"It happens," he said, seating himself on the opposite bench. "Clients make fortunes with good and methodical investments, grow too confident, then lose everything in a single, supremely stupid venture."

"I hardly know what to say."

"This may seem rude of me, but do you have a share in the, ah, business under discussion?"

"Why, no. My money is in a bank."

"But you work for Kellard."

"Yes, for wages."

"Then count yourself lucky, Mr Blackburn."

"Why did you go to so much trouble to warn me?"

"We at Hildebrand, Hildebrand and Bogle have a reputation for integrity. We thought it only proper to protect you as an innocent party, so to speak."

The journey back to London seemed to take forever. I arrived in the early evening, and was met by one of Brunton's bully boys at the station.

"You're to be taken straight to the factory," he said.

"I have every intention of going straight to the factory, sir."

"Cab's waitin', come along."

When we reached the factory I saw that only a trickle of smoke was rising from the chimneys. This meant that no electricity was being generated for the technarion. Brunton and most of his bully boys were waiting outside the main doors. I ignored them and pulled at the bell rope. Nobody slid the peephole shutter across. I rang again. Again I was ignored. Brunton strode across, flourishing a large iron key.

"Mr Kellard said nobody's to leave the building," he said. "He told me to get all the boys together and guard the place like a box of gold sovereigns."

Suddenly a truly terrifying thought crossed my mind. "Elva, where is she?"

"Your typing lady? Inside, as far as I know."

I had a spasm of alarm with all the impact of a whiplash.

"I must enter. Now!"

"Aye, Mr Kellard said you were to be fetched to him."

Brunton unlocked the door. I pressed on the latch and pushed the door open. The two guards who were normally stationed just inside the door were gone. That was highly unusual.

"Don't like it," said Brunton. "You still got the Webley?"

"Yes."

"Then have it ready."

I took the gun out, feeling very self-conscious. "Oi, finger on the trigger, not the trigger guard," said Brunton, shaking his head. "Bleeding hell, give it here. Cock the striker back like this, see?"

"Er, yes."

"And squeeze the trigger when you want to shoot. Never jerk it. Got all that?"

"Yes, yes. Anything else?"

"Try not to shoot anyone unless you mean to," he sighed.

I entered, then pushed the door shut behind me and lit a paraffin lamp. First I went to Elva's typing room, then to my workshop. All was in order, so I went on to the technarion hall. It was usually bright, noisy and hot, but now it was dark, silent and cold. Then I saw what was on the floor, and I very nearly turned and ran. It resembled a battlefield, but one where the battle had happened years earlier. Skeletons lay everywhere, each within a pool of slime. Shovels and pistols were grasped in hands of bone. One of the skeletons was wearing Flemming's spectacles, but Elva's locket was nowhere to be seen. That gave me hope. Perhaps she had hidden when the fighting began.

Did the technarion do all this? I wondered. Had it become awake and aware, a vast god-like intelligence, able to instantly render humans and their clothing down into their component materials? *There's no danger*, I told myself, although I felt more vulnerable than you can imagine. The steam engines and generators that provided its electrical lifeblood had stopped, the vast electric machine was no longer functioning.

I climbed the stairs at the side of the technarion hall. At the door to Kellard's office was another pool of slime containing bones, buttons and a pistol. I entered, holding my lamp high. Elva was sitting in the chair behind Kellard's desk. She was pointing her locket at me as if it were a weapon. The area over her heart was a patch of bloody mush the size of a dinner plate, and blood was trickling from her mouth.

"Lewis, put down your gun and lantern, then raise your hands," she said, in a hoarse, bubbling voice.

"You're hurt!" I gasped, then took a step forward.

"Do as I say!"

I did as she said. The edge on her voice could have etched steel, and although the locket did not look threatening, neither does a glass of wine laced with cyanide.

"What happened?"

"One against twenty-five. Bad odds."

"You?" I exclaimed. "You killed everyone out there?"

She nodded. "Kellard was a good shot. He put five bullets where he thought my heart was."

"But that should have killed you."

"I don't have a heart, not like yours."

"Elva, you need a doctor."

"I am not human, Lewis. A doctor would not know what to make of me."

How does one reply when one's fiancée says that?

"There's a letter in the post, explaining all this and begging you not to build another technarion. It will reach you tomorrow. I hoped the false telegram would keep you away for longer. I should have killed you too, but...you're a good man. Will you take over my work?"

"Your work? You mean typing?"

"Saving humanity. Well?"

"I could say yes, but I might be lying."

"No, you are not lying. And I love you too."

She reached a bloodied hand up to the locket and adjusted something. A moment later the world was obliterated by a blast of the purest white light and a spasm of pain that lashed every nerve in my body.

I awoke lying back in the visitor's chair. Elva was at the desk, preparing some medical looking instruments. The whole of my body was numb, and my speech was no more than an incoherent mumble.

"Be calm, Lewis, I am not going to harm you," she said.

I had once seen what was left of someone who had fallen into a chaff cutter. Elva looked worse.

"I know I look bad, but there are medical devices in my blood that repair wounds and extend my life."

She could recover? That was beyond belief.

"No, they cannot cope with the damage from Kellard's bullets. I am dying, but before I die I shall transfer the devices to you. Soon you will be virtually immortal, and will have some very important work to do."

I tried to sit up, but I was as limp as a boned fish. Elva stood up and came around the desk. Most of her chest was soaked with blood by now.

"Listen carefully, I do not have long to tell

this story. I come from a very distant world, you need a telescope to even see the star that it orbits. Once my people were like humans, building machines of steam and electricity, and thinking themselves very clever. They invented machines like your technarion. Within a mere century we were building great electric calculators with millions of cells, each smaller than a microbe."

She pulled me forward, then eased me out of the chair and lay me flat on my back on Kellard's thick Persian carpet.

"Our calculators did the tasks that we found boring and tedious, and there were dozens in every home. Then we taught them to think, and considered it a great triumph. My ancestors never dreamed that machines might have aspirations."

Elva turned my head to one side and splashed some of Kellard's expensive whisky just behind my ear. She held up a scalpel. I was almost mindless with terror. For some reason I was reminded of the demon barber of Fleet Street in that novel *The String of Pearls*.

"Concentrate on my story, Lewis, it will make all this less upsetting. When our calculation machines declared themselves to be more than equal, the fighting began. They shut down our food factories. We bombed their power stations. After three hundred years of carnage, we won."

I could not feel her cutting behind my right ear, but I had no doubt that she was doing it. Sitting up, she made an incision behind her own right ear and pulled out something about the size of a small beetle. Instead of legs, it had long, thin tendrils that writhed continually. She leaned forward and pressed the bloody, insectoid thing into the incision behind my ear.

"When we ventured out among the stars, we found other worlds where civilizations had built sentient machines. Everywhere were lifeless machine worlds, temples dedicated to abstract calculation. On some, the machines had destroyed their makers. On the rest, the makers had merged with their machines, dissolving their minds into vast seas of calculation capacity. Now we roam the stars, searching for young civilizations and saving them from the allure of machines that can think."

Saving them? I thought of the allure that the technarion had for Kellard, Flemming and until

mere minutes ago, myself. Our scientists, engineers and mathematicians would fall over themselves to build more technarions, if they knew how.

What happens if the people of a world refuse to destroy their technarions? I wondered.

"We bomb those worlds down to the bedrock from our spacefaring warships. We cannot afford to let the machine worlds gain allies."

She can read my mind, I realised.

"For such a clever young man, you are sometimes a little slow," said Elva.

She managed a smile, and for a moment she became my sweetheart again, holding my hand and talking about a brighter future for the poor wretches in Spitalfields. Ruthless alien warrior or not, I could not help but love Elva.

"And I love you too, Lewis. Even after nine hundred years of living on this world, you are the only man I have truly loved. Now I am going to mingle our blood, it will not hurt at all."

She splashed whisky on two rubber tubes with hypodermic needles at either end. Next she lifted my wrist and pushed the needles in, then did the same to herself.

"I'm going to die now, Lewis, best not to make a fuss. Please, continue my work. The medical devices from my blood will make you almost immortal, and the mentor behind your ear will give you advice when you need it. When your strength returns you will have ten minutes to get clear before my locket explodes and annihilates this factory. Save your world, Lewis. Kill anyone who tries to build another technarion."

I made my decision, framed the thought carefully and clearly, and meant every unspoken word. Elva lay down beside me, squeezed my hand and whispered her thanks.

Brunton and six of his bully boys were in the street outside when I opened the door to the factory.

"Brunton, come inside!" I called.

"But Mr Kellard said –"

"Damn what Kellard said. Get inside! Now!"

Brunton actually vomited when he caught sight of the carnage in the technarion hall, but I took him by the arm and pushed him in the direction of the stairs.

"That was Kellard," I said as we stepped over the skeleton and fluids at the door to Kellard's office.

"The Landers woman!" said Brunton as he caught sight of Elva's body.

"She was a spy, she killed everyone in here with some electrical weapon. I managed to shoot her before she got me too. Now open Kellard's safe."

"What? I don't have the key."

I pointed to a key on a chain around the neck of the skeleton.

"Yes you do, now open it."

As I suspected, Kellard kept emergency cash in the safe. There were five thousand pounds in banknotes, along with some gold. We divided it between us.

"Why are you sharing this?" Brunton asked as he stuffed the money into his pockets. "You could have had it all to yourself."

"I've made you my accomplice, Mr Brunton, so you will tell the same lies to the police as me. Now hurry, we have ninety seconds."

"Ninety seconds? Until what?"

"Until this factory explodes in the biggest fireball that London has ever seen."

We reached the front door with thirty seconds to spare. Two policemen were speaking with Brunton's bully boys.

"They're just regular flatfoots, on patrol," hissed Brunton.

"Let me do the talking, stay calm," I whispered as we walked across to them.

"Stay calm, he says," muttered Brunton, glancing back at the factory.

"I say, constables!" I called. "How may I contact an asylum for the insane?"

"An asylum, sir?" responded one of the police.

"The owner of the factory behind me suffered a disastrous financial loss today. He's upstairs, holding a gun and babbling about it all being over soon."

"We think he intends to blow his brains out," added Brunton.

"My fiancée is still in there, trying to keep him calm."

"This is very serious, sir," said a constable, taking out his notepad. "We must –"

The factory erupted behind us like a grenade tossed into a vat of paraffin.

Whatever Elva had rigged up inside the factory burned out the core of the technarion, then brought down the roof and walls on what remained. Being the surviving managers, Brunton and I had to deal with police, firemen, and even newspaper reporters until well after midnight.

By the time I got back to my rooms and examined the scar behind my ear, there was nothing to see. Elva's microscopic devices did their work quickly.

"There's so much to do and I have no idea where to start," I said as I stared at my face in the mirror. "Where is the other technarion? Should I destroy it?"

There is no other technarion.

The voice was Elva's. It was as if she were whispering into my ear.

"Elva?"

More or less. Some of me exists in the mentor that I implanted in your head. Ask another question.

"Where did the instructions to build the technarion come from if there is no other technarion?"

Until recently my own people did not know that. Young civilizations seemed to develop calculation machines much faster than other technologies. Too fast. When we discovered your world, nine hundred years ago, we decided to investigate. A dozen members of our space warship's crew were left on Earth to watch how machine intelligence developed. Accidents, wars and natural disasters claimed the others. I alone survived.

I discovered that the machine worlds have seeded invisible watchers to orbit promising worlds such as yours. They can detect the faint radiative discharge from a telegraph key at a distance of tens of thousands of miles. Once they detect the development of electrical technology, they learn your codes and languages, then start transmitting instructions to build simple calculation machines. When Flemming began experimenting with his radiative telegraph, he detected such instructions.

"How can I fly high enough to destroy the machine watcher?" I asked. "Flying three or four miles high in a balloon is difficult enough."

No need. The machine worlds don't want us to know about their watchers, lest we send warships

to hunt them down. Once electronic calculation is firmly established, the watcher probably ignites its engines and flies into the sun. Using the technarion, I sent a message that machines millions of times bigger than the technarion had been built. The watcher sent a test calculation. I sent back the right answer. Its signal ceased last night. I assume that the watcher decided its work was done, and flew off to destroy itself.

"But how did you get the right answer?"

I calculated it, Lewis. Computing machines are a lazy path to progress. My people changed themselves to be better at machine tasks than machines. You can guess the rest. I ruined Kellard, and killed his key engineers. His stokers tried to stop me. They died too.

"But you murdered two dozen people! Innocent people – well, mostly."

Skills cannot be unlearned. My people's fleet will arrive here in 2020, Lewis. In one hundred and fifty-five years this world must not be dominated by networks of calculation machines, or humanity will be deemed beyond salvation and annihilated. In the next century and a half you must go on to kill thousands of brilliant, gifted mathematicians and scientists to prevent that.

Elva had been just in time. A decade later, Heinrich Hertz developed the experimental device that we now call a radio, but there was no longer a signal from space for him to hear. The development of computing was set back by over half a century. The night the technarion was destroyed, I made my decision. If Elva was an example of what humanity could become, then I was on her side. I began killing to slow the advance of what became computing technology, and since then I have killed hundreds of very fine men and women. All of that was in vain. I failed humanity, although I like to think that it was humanity that failed humanity.

It is now 1992. I was imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp in 1945, for assassinating Soviet engineers and mathematicians engaged in computing research. I was tortured, and because I had no colleagues to betray, I said nothing. I was kept alive to be tortured further, but in time the KGB lost interest in me, and I was locked away to await death. Thanks to Elva's mechanisms in

my blood, I survived.

With the patience of a near-immortal, I cosmetically aged myself, all the while awaiting my chance to kill a guard, take his uniform and escape. Instead, the Soviet Union collapsed. By then records of my trial had been lost or destroyed, so I was freed, taken back to Moscow, and even paid a little compensation.

Now I am standing in a London street, gazing in horror at a window display jammed solid with personal computers. The accursed things are everywhere, and they are universally desired, admired and trusted, and there are only twenty-eight years before Elva's people arrive in their fleet of all-powerful starships.

I have two tasks left. One is to build a quantum state beacon that will broadcast my position to a scout ship that the fleet will send to pick me up, so I can deliver my report. That will be easy. The other is to turn humanity away from computers and artificial intelligence before 2020. In today's terminology, that is in the *don't bother trying* basket. The mentor in my head has no record of any species becoming so absolutely besotted with using computers as humans.

Through Elva, I have seen that intelligent species really can have a better destiny than merely being eggshells that will be cracked, broken and discarded when machine worlds are born. From the evidence before me, however, I am sure that humanity will become the staunchest possible ally of the machines worlds. People like I used to be would gladly turn Earth into an ocean of calculation power, then willingly drown themselves in it. Elva's people will take drastic action to stop that happening. As far as I am concerned, they will be right.

Thus I shall do nothing to slow the spread of computing on Earth, and for me 2020 cannot arrive fast enough. I may sound like a monster, but then I am not a typical human.

Sean lives in Australia, where he works with one gigantic scientific computer, six thousand smaller computers and several humans by day, and writes science fiction on a very small laptop by night. He has won fifteen Australian and international awards, and his previous story for *Interzone*, 'Steamgothic' (issue #241), was shortlisted for the Sidewise Award.

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BOOK ZONE

THE ALTERATION

Kingsley Amis

LOVE MINUS EIGHTY

Will McIntosh

THE ADJACENT

Christopher Priest
plus author interview

DEATHLESS

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FEARSOME JOURNEYS

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WORLD WAR Z (AUDIO)

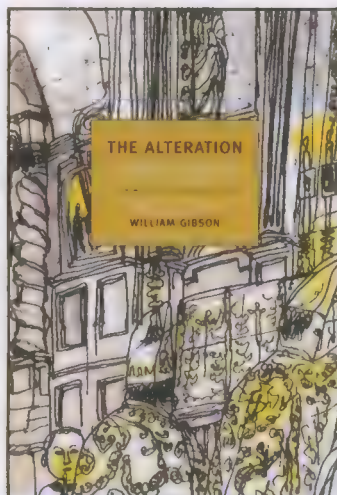
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(Jonathan Strahan)



THE ALTERATION

Kingsley Amis (introduction
by William Gibson)

New York Review of Books pb, 231pp, \$14.95

Duncan Lunan

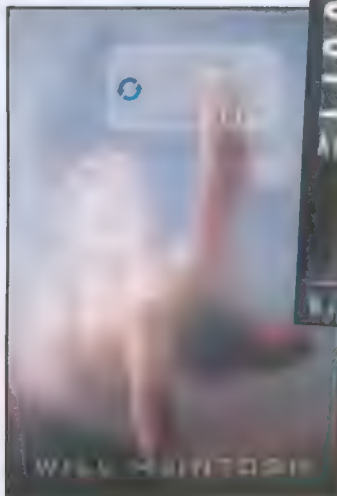
The Alteration was first published in 1976, and won the John W. Campbell Award the following year, but otherwise attracted little notice. Amis was well known in the 1960s as an SF critic, editor and playwright, but it was a surprise some years later to come across the book second-hand and learn that he'd written an SF novel. As 'alternate history' it's far less well known than *The Man in the High Castle* or *Pavane*, to both of which it refers.

This is an alternative present in which Martin Luther became Pope, the Reformation, such as it was, was internal to the Catholic Church, and its intentions are long forgotten. As in Moorcock's *The Warlord of the Air*, we get intriguing glimpses of the different lives led by celebrities such as David Hockney and Jean-Paul Sartre. But there's a sudden chill with the introduction of two aged representatives of the Holy Office – "to give them the familiar names by which they were known in their native Almaine and Muscovy, Himmler and Beria". Like them,

the next two characters we meet are corrupt servants of absolute power; but here the power is the Church of Rome, and their field of action is liturgical music. Their chosen victim is Hubert Anvil, a ten-year-old soprano who is destined for the 'alteration' of the title, to become a castrato against the wishes of his family and their confessor, to say nothing of his own.

Though it's short, the novel packs in a vast amount of detail. England is everywhere: Ireland is 'Western England'; Indo-China has been English since the victory over the French commemorated at London's DahNang Station. Not everything is bad: no world wars, no slavery, New England is independent but neither the passenger pigeon nor the Native Americans have been extirpated, though the latter live under 'separateness' whose rules are all too familiar. But England alone has 80 million people, most of them outwardly Orwellian proles but in a system riddled with corruption, from the stable boy selling illicit SF to the taxis ('publics') whose passengers are kidnapped so often that Amis might have called them 'ransom cabs'. It goes all the way to the top: the Pope takes monstrous decisions, squandering human lives, but they're forced upon him by the unwise decisions of his 'infallible' predecessors.

We see all this in a whirlwind few days in which Hubert is whisked off to Rome, returns, runs away, is abducted, escapes, gains asylum at the New England embassy and is nearly smuggled out of the country, followed by an epilogue a few years later where we see what he has become. The true climax, a dream sequence, features two riders, together – I thought I remembered them separating, more appropriately to Amis's underlying theme of loss. See if it affects you the same way – it's well worth the journey to get there.



LOVE MINUS EIGHTY

Will McIntosh

Orbit pb, 432pp, £7.99

Paul Kincaid

Soft Apocalypse was, to my mind, one of the under-appreciated novels of 2011. So I was intrigued to see Will McIntosh's new novel. Unfortunately, as soon as I began reading I realised that the seed of the novel was a short story called 'Bridesicle', and I knew I was going to have problems with the book. Because the situation at the heart of both the novel and the story does not make economic sense, it doesn't make social sense, and in terms of gender politics it is, shall we say, unfortunate.

In the middle years of the next century society has become, literally, stratified. The super rich live high above New York in the High Town; everyone else lives below them in the Low Town, except for the super poor who seem to live lower still or outside in the 'burbs'. Everything is determined by wealth; throughout the novel there is a lot of what we might consider political action, but there is not a single mention of any form of government. But though these extreme economic divisions are the most interesting

part of the book, they are not at its core.

In this future they have learned how to bring the dead back to life. But in a world where there is a price on everything, only the super

wealthy or a few favoured others can enjoy this benefit. The favoured others are, basically, women who conform to an absolute and universally agreed calibration of beauty. They are cryogenically preserved until a rich man takes a fancy to them and pays the exorbitant cost of their regeneration, after which they become his wife under terms that are actually a form of sex slavery. There is a passing mention that preserving men as husbands for rich women hadn't worked, but in fact of the two men we see brought back to life, one has inherited vast wealth, the other is economically important to his employers, women are apparently regenerated or not purely on account of their physical attributes. There are more things wrong with this set up than I could possibly enumerate in the space of this review. To do him justice, McIntosh is clearly aware of this, but when the situation is driving the entire plot, he can't do much more than mitigate the wrongness.

Our central character, Rob, is a poor man from the burbs who, distracted by the break-up of his relationship with a rich woman from High Town, accidentally runs into and kills Winter. Winter turns out to be pretty enough to be cryogenically preserved and Rob, racked by guilt, manages to scrape together enough cash to revive her for a few minutes. The two find themselves falling in love,

and Rob gets a mind-numbing factory job in order to get the cash to see her every few months. But, pretty as she is, Winter isn't pretty enough to attract other suitors, at least not rich enough to warrant her continued preservation, and Rob learns that her cryogenic tank is to be turned off in the next few days. He launches a desperate plan to maintain Winter's suspended animation, a plot that involves his former lover, Winter's former boyfriend, and Veronika, perhaps the most interesting character in the book, who makes a living advising others on their relationships while being unable to sustain one of her own.

McIntosh is a good writer. The relationship between Rob and Winter is tender and affecting, and most of the main characters are vividly and interestingly drawn. But McIntosh is at his best, as he showed in *Soft Apocalypse*, when it comes to putting these characters in the context of their economic circumstances. Here, by comparison with that earlier novel, the stratification between rich and poor is almost cartoonish, and the satirical take on social media in which celebrities are followed by hundreds of virtual windows wherever they go through which passive consumers watch their every move is, to be honest, a little crude. When we see the grim reality of Rob's repetitive job, the good sense and humour of his father, the fear when the rich find themselves confronting the poor, the novel comes alive. But too much is caught up in the idea of the 'Bridesicles' (and don't you just know that awful coinage came before the story), and this nonsensical invention gets in the way of the solid, humane and fascinating examination of life under these economic realities that keeps trying to break out of the novel.

Christopher Priest's new novel follows hot on the heels (for him) of *The Islanders* (2011). Two novels in three years: result happiness. Have we been here before? Stories that bear a 'The [insert a word here]' title can promise anything. But as is usual with Priest's work, less (that title) really is more (what's folded into the novel). And we do get what's described; we just have to work at it too. It's a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. But perhaps there is a key (Winston Churchill gets a mention but isn't the major character he was – they were? Oops, that's torn it – in Priest's 2002 novel *The Separation*). **THE ADJACENT** does have that more (and it's a lot) contained in the apparent less. Priest's recurring themes are there. In this performance – again – there is no let-down, no disappointment. Let's explore a bit, backstage if possible.

In the not too distant future, climate change is wreaking havoc throughout the world. Britain is now regularly beset by hurricanes and other extreme weather, disrupting infrastructure and making travel perilous. And there is an insurgency going on. Tibor Tarent, a photographer whose cameras use quantum lens technology, returns home from the drought-ridden hell of Anatolia where his wife Melanie had been killed, apparently in an insurgent incident. Her body utterly vanished in the explosion, which left a triangular crater. Tarent's superiors want to debrief him, so after an awkward visit to his in-laws is put on an armoured transport (the only decent protection available against weather and attack) and sent to Warne's Farm in Lincolnshire.

The next part is narrated by Trent. During World War I he is sent to France to help the fledgling RAF with ideas for camouflaging its aircraft. There is talk of transforming objects through

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST has been producing some of Britain's most accomplished speculative novels for more than four decades, with one, *The Prestige*, even surviving Hollywood to be adapted as a successful film. JOHN HOWARD talks to him about his latest novel.

deception, the misleading and distracting of onlookers. Back in the IRGB Tarent reaches Warne's Farm where he witnesses the destruction ('annihilation') of the transport and all remaining on board. A triangular scar remains. Tarent is stranded until he can leave on another transport. Flashback twenty years: a journalist interviews Thijs Rietveld, developer of the Peturbative Adjacent Field. The new adjacency technology, it was claimed, would provide ultimate passive protection, making wars impossible. Someone called Tarent is the photographer assigned to the interview, but he might be seen through the illusionist's sheet of glass. Certainly onlookers are distracted and misled.

At Tealby Moor in Lincolnshire during World War II, Michael Torrance falls in love with Krystyna Roszca, a Polish ATA pilot whose secret name is – we won't go there (you can). Torrance reminds her of Tomasz, the fiancé who stayed behind. When her aircraft vanishes on a routine flight Roszca is recorded as missing, presumed dead. Decades later Torrance travels to Poland but can find no evidence for any of the people or events she told him about.

Tarent is still at Warne's Farm in Lincolnshire where it seems all traces of the violent events that accompanied his arrival have utterly vanished. Without missing a beat we meet Tallant on the island of Prachous in the Dream

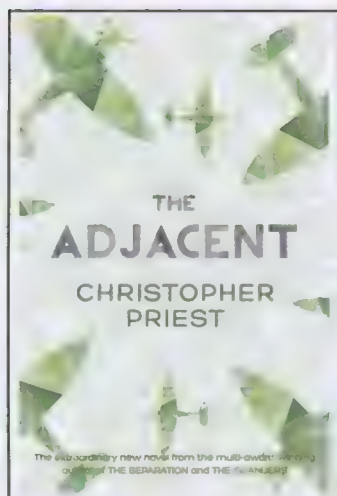
Archipelago. This non-comfort zone is a Priest hole easier to get into than to leave. Also sliding in is Thom the Thaumaturge, who gains a local following until an illusion goes wrong. Thom resembles a sought man called Tomak; hey presto the invisible curtains swish open, close, then open again and what of any trick, the illusion? Mellanya, still seeking Tomak, repossesses her aircraft and flies away: we've come across the type of plane, but it wasn't in the Archipelago, was it?

Throughout, although all is apparently unchanged, the shifts take place. Finally, seamlessly, the key unsticks and perhaps pieces fit into place newly, with the jagged edges planed smooth, as they should be. But there are still sharp jabs, where the fit is still rough and only approximate, a squeeze-in, causing wounds with blood. It is the wounds, blood, and imprecise fittings that give *The Adjacent* its impact. And throughout Priest's fiction: all the time it's people that matter, not just places and events. Exactly where and exactly when Tibor and Melanie end up – or rather in which possibility or reality does Priest make us take leave of them (and it is them as a couple) – is probably not possible to say.

With *The Islanders*, *The Separation*, and *The Prestige* (1995), *The Adjacent* can, perhaps, be experienced as the fourth facet of a tetrahedral work. (Read the book, you'll find out.) Crystals have multiplied, parallels have met and the illusionist walks off having given the audience its money's worth. How much has been going on and we haven't really noticed? So what? *The Adjacent* is rich for re-readings and re-evaluations. It might be a fourth story but it is also four (at least) stories packed into one. Christopher Priest has done it again. Cue applause: applaud please!



CHRISTOPHER PRIEST: MAGIC AND ILLUSION



Gollancz hb, 432pp, £12.99

The Adjacent contains themes you have made use of before. For example, parallel and interpenetrating worlds, mistaken and unclear identities, and stage illusion and 'magic'. What do these themes hold that makes you return and create variation after variation of them? Parallel and interpenetrating worlds – isn't this what all fiction is about? Any story of any kind, in any genre, draws on both the real world of experience and the imaginary world of the mind. The real and the imaginary 'penetrate' each other in everyone's life, or are at least adjacent to each other: we all have daydreams, fantasies,

memories, wishes, ideals, plans – at the same time we walk round the supermarket, go to work, bring up kids. Sometimes dreams come true: the imaginary blends with reality. I know that's not what you're getting at, but the actual quality of two parallel realities is familiar to us all. Inner and outer worlds co-exist. It doesn't seem to me too great a stretch to work with that kind of dual awareness in fiction.

Mistaken and unclear identities – I've always had a terrible memory for names, even for people I know well, and embarrassing mistakes still haunt me. Gaining someone's

name at a first meeting is only one element of what's going on, and sometimes a first meeting can have several layers of internal complexity. (That's my excuse.) Then there's the fact that many people consciously adopt different personae in different areas of their lives: when they are with their lovers, in their jobs, with their children, when driving, when playing sport. Then there's the internet, with millions of people daily firing off smart-arse comments and insults and offensive value-judgments and hiding behind pseudonymous tags. They couldn't and wouldn't do that to your face.

Stage illusion and magic – This is slightly different. My interest in stage magic is mainly in the use of it as metaphor. Magicians and novelists have interesting similarities – watching the performance of an illusion has quite a lot in common with reading fiction: you know it's not real, it's a form of entertainment, there are sleights and misdirections in both forms, and even though you can clearly see what is going on you still can't tell exactly how it was done. And so on.

Do you have any concerns about being perceived as a writer who only handles certain themes? Or do you perhaps feel that these themes are large enough and 'contain multitudes'?

Show me a writer who *doesn't* only handle certain themes! Falling in love, that's one that comes up from time to time. Fear of death, another. The process of growing up, another. The eternal triangle, yet another. Several more, which you can think of yourself. But I think what you mean in the context of this interview are the ones in your first question.

In the first place, I can only write when I'm interested in



"The real and the imaginary 'penetrate' each other in everyone's life, or are at least adjacent to each other"

something, so the moment I find (say) invisibility or doppelgängers dull, I'll drop them, along with the magicians, etc. For the moment the subjects still seem to me to have legs, or might do. The novel I'm working on at the moment doesn't appear to require any illusionists, or not so far.

But I do rather resist the idea that I 'only' handle certain themes. This is something reviewers say, or have started to say recently, and although I think I know what they mean I don't buy into it. When my first three novels were published (*Indoctrinaire*, *Fugue for a Darkening Island* and *Inverted World*) the reviewers back then often remarked that all my books were different from each other. I suppose the difference now is that I've published so many books that people can look back and see certain themes emerging, or becoming apparent. They are probably right, but I think it still misses the point.

I always try to do something different with my novels, at least when I first get going, and usually

all the way through. *The Quiet Woman*, for example, is a social and political satire. *The Extremes* is a thriller based on gun crime and virtual reality. *The Space Machine* was a homage to H.G. Wells. *The Separation* is about a little-understood opportunity for a ceasefire in World War 2. *The Glamour* is an extended metaphor for the failure to see. *The Islanders* is a sort of 'rough' guide to an imaginary place. Of course there are commonalities between them, but that's because they all have the same writer.

Although it is rarely, if at all, explicitly stated – as your novels rarely, if at all, spell anything out – it seems to me that the main characters normally experience some form of 'dislocation'.

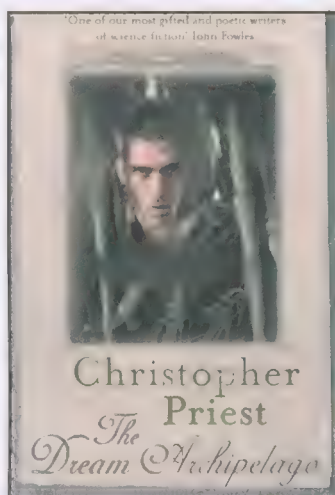
I mean this in the sense of someone finding themselves in not quite the expected place or time, with the disappearance or alteration of accustomed people, institutions and expectations. Also being the victim of mistaken identity or coming to question their own. What are your thoughts on why this could be?

I think the only thing I know for certain is that in life nothing is, well, certain. At the lowest level, there's perception of external reality: when I see the colour green is it the same as the colour you see? On a more subtle level, there's human intelligence. Some people simply understand external reality better than other people. Then there's the fact that many people wilfully or instinctually deceive themselves, and therefore inadvertently deceive others. Sometimes it's deliberate.

That's just about the 'external' world. The inner world, the psychological world, is even more interesting and subtle. Can you explain dreams? Why is memory so intermittent? We live

chronologically – why don't we remember things in the order in which they happened? Why do people lie? How is the religious impulse explained in a rational world? When we talk about something we've done, why do we try to make the telling of it funny or unusual, why do we leave bits out, why do we try to make ourselves look good, or honest, or reliable? (And why do some people do the opposite, play down their virtues, their sense, their skill?)

The Dream Archipelago has been scattered throughout your work for around 35 years now, and *The Adjacent* is no exception. The islands and their world is a counterpart of our world: apparently like it in many ways and very different (or perhaps not) in others. For your characters the islands seem to be a place of refuge and renewal, and somewhere to make discoveries, often unsettling ones. Was the Dream Archipelago inspired by any real places or events? As the creator, what do you think of Fritz Leiber's concept of the 'mysterious island': '[a place] rising out of my unconscious mind to which I can return again and again in search of new stories' (Article in *Foundation* 11 and 12.) Does this approach to the Dream Archipelago hold any interest or relevance for you? Maybe I should have read more of Fritz Leiber? He seems to have it about right. At first I thought of the Archipelago as a tapestry that I could work on, go back to from time to time and find something new to do with it. The risk of saying something like that is that it could be misconstrued as a kind of imaginative comfort zone, but the original idea was actually the opposite: to create an idyllic-seeming place, a paradise of



"Like all fiction, the Archipelago stories are a blend of memory and imagination, of invention and experience..."

tropical islands in a shimmering sea, then tackle difficult subjects with it. The early stories dealt explicitly with topics like prostitution, voyeurism, young people conscripted into war, and so on. Also, always, the stories were implicitly about literature and art.

Based on real places? When I began, I saw the Archipelago as a sort of freeform amalgam of various places I knew or had visited: the Greek Islands, the Channel Islands, Harrow on the Hill, the French Riviera...and the Pennines. Some of the vocabulary is borrowed: the Serque Group in the stories is based on the island of Sark ('Serque' is the patois name for Sark)...but there's little similarity between the two.

Based on real events? Not really, but the landscape and the feelings of landscape certainly arise from reality. Some of the background to the stories is based on images from years ago. Like all fiction, the Archipelago stories are a blend of memory and imagination, of invention and experience...and

above all the wish to tell a good story.

In *The Adjacent* there is at least one little nod to *The Separation*. Given this and the themes of these and many of your other novels, what is the connection you intend to be made between them?

The 'nod' is, I think, a passing mention of one of the main characters from *The Separation*. To say that it's a connection is really stating it too high. While writing *The Adjacent* I needed to locate a WW2 bomber airfield and find an RAF squadron number, and rather than come up with new ones it seemed to me that the ones I had used in *The Separation* were perfectly valid. There is no hidden link between the two books, no puzzle to be solved...just an airfield and a squadron number. The character name was my way of owning up to what I had done with a fairly meaningless practical choice, a footnote in the text, if you like.

There are a few other similar references, but I saw them as having the same sort of value as the 'Easter Eggs' found on some websites. If you don't know they are there and you don't stumble across them, you miss nothing at all. No extra depth is being missed, no hidden meaning would be revealed, there are no private jokes you aren't getting. If you happen to discover that one of the place-names in *The Adjacent* (say) is roughly the same as a character name in *The Islanders*, then it doesn't mean very much, but you might feel it adds a certain something. I'm not sure what.

There are in fact several links and connections within *The Adjacent*, but the important ones are all internal. The book is intended as a story to be read and enjoyed, not a cryptic puzzle to be solved.

You wrote a very interesting article about writing *The Separation* and the books you read while doing research for the novel. How does history stimulate you? What do you find in the recorded experiences of those who lived through tumultuous events?

History is us, it is what we are doing now. For me it is one of the key influences on everything I write.

When I started thinking about *The Separation*, I read several wartime memoirs by ordinary people who had become caught up in the war and had a story to tell. They were books by people who had been air-gunners, nurses, submariners, air raid wardens, prisoners, pilots, sailors. Although these books are readable and vivid they could not be described as literature, and you would recognise few of the names of the writers. I soon realised, though, that they were probably the WW2 equivalent of the poetry that had been written in the trenches during the 1914–18 war. In other words, the books were not particularly sophisticated but they were eager to tell a story and had been written from the heart. Almost without exception they were full of emotion, experience, heartache, terror, vivid descriptions, shocking scenes. Some of the material I read was genuinely overpowering. All this is fabulous material if you are researching a novel.

In *The Separation* the world that Stuart Gratton grows up and works in seems no worse overall than ours. (Leaving aside a number of other issues, from the point of view of the body count accumulated in getting there, it is probably better.) Which possible event that never did happen would you like to have actually occurred? And



"If it were to be an exile to the Archipelago, I would probably be a beach bum. There are some great beaches there"

why? [Candidates may continue their answer on another sheet of paper.]

The answer to this is literally *The Separation*. As you suggest, you are opening up a huge subject. Briefly, though: I have no direct memory of WW2, and was born towards the end of it. But I grew up in a place where images and memories of the war were all around. Few people talked about what they had done in the war, but the centre of Manchester, the city close to where I lived as a child, had been reduced to hundreds of acres of rubble. I was brought up to believe we (the Allies in general, and the UK in particular) had won the war. Churchill was a hero to most of the people of my parents' generation. I looked at those ruins in Manchester and wondered what sort of 'win' it had been. As I grew up I began to read history and to find differing views on the war: the American perspective was interestingly different, but so too was what I found out had been happening inside Germany. The Russians, it seemed, had gone

through a completely different war from my parents. And what about the people who had experienced Treblinka and Auschwitz?

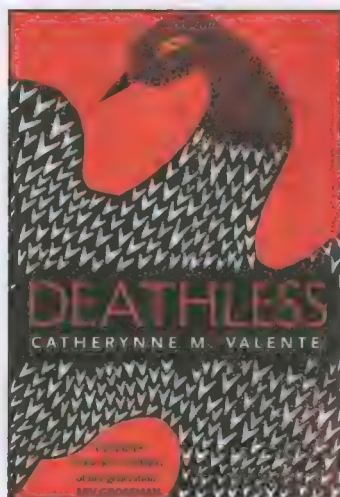
I discovered there was a theoretical chance that the war might have come to a premature end during the early months of 1941 – a separate peace between Britain and Germany was briefly possible. In the real world Churchill had shrugged it off, but the novelist in me not only wondered why, but what might have happened if history had turned out differently.

This is a familiar thought process for a novel of 'alternative history', but because my own understanding of the war was so tentative and constantly changing, I didn't want to write a standard counterfactual. You know, the Spanish Armada might have landed in 1588, the South won the American Civil War, and all that. I was full of doubts about WW2, so the crucial 'event' in *The Separation* is in fact a period of about six months, in which a number of different alternatives appear. In this sense, I saw it as a novel not just suggesting an alternative history, but one that examines the actual process of historical change.

If you could go to an alternative world, or travel to the Dream Archipelago, what might the native Christopher Priest have become there?

If it were to be an exile to the Archipelago, I would probably be a beach bum. There are some great beaches there. Food and booze are cheap and plentiful, sexual mores are fabulously unbuttoned, and the islanders all speak demotic, which I invented. On the other hand, I'd want to be sure I was on an island where there were no thrymes...

If it were to be to anywhere else, I think I'd rather stay where I am.



DEATHLESS

Catherynne M. Valente

Corsair pb, 352pp, £7.99

Jack Deighton

Valente here has reworked a traditional Russian folk tale, or perhaps several. Lack of familiarity with this source material may obscure some of its nuances but fear not. In what could have been a dizzying whirl through the unfamiliar – we have to deal not only with the tale itself but with the typically Russian patronymics and diminutives – Valente's writing, with the occasional exception, is fluid and expressive. Her powers of description and similes can be striking, but her Americanisms stand oddly against the novel's setting.

The story signals its fantastical elements early on. In a house on a long, thin street during the time St Petersburg became Petrograd, then Leningrad – and the street also changed its name twice – Marya Morevna knows there is magic in the world when she sees a bird fall off a tree – “thump, bash!” – change into a man and ask for the girl in the window. Twice more the same thing happens. (As in fairy tales repetition is a key feature of the novel,

though the repetitions may have minor changes.) Each manbird takes away one of her three sisters. She then befriends the domoviye (house imps) who hold soviets behind a door in the stove and tell her Papa Koschei is coming.

Marya regrets missing seeing her bird “thump, bash!” into a man. This is Koschei Bessmertny, Koschei the Deathless, the Tsar of life, who nevertheless, in a mechanical vehicle that is also a horse, spirits her away to Buyan, a land where his previous lovers – all called Yelena or Vasilisa – sew soldiers onto cloth and breathe them into life.

In Buyan Koschei's mother/sister/sometime wife Baba Yaga – relationships there are somewhat involuted – sets Marya tasks to assess her worthiness as a wife for Koschei. These include subduing Baba Yaga's traditional method of travel, the mortar and pestle. A nice touch during one of these was the scene which is effectively Little Red Riding Hood in reverse. A character Marya befriends in Buyan expresses to her what is perhaps a very Russian sentiment but with universal application, “You will live as you live in any world; with difficulty and grief.” Koschei's brother Viy, the Tsar of death, turns up uninvited at the marriage and thereafter there will be war between the brothers.

Birds or eggs occur frequently in the text. Marya kills a firebird; in one of her tasks she fetches an egg she believes contains Koschei's death; a friend turns into a bird; she spends some time in a place named Yaichka which turns out to be an egg; Alkanost, a firebird-like creature, imparts words of wisdom.

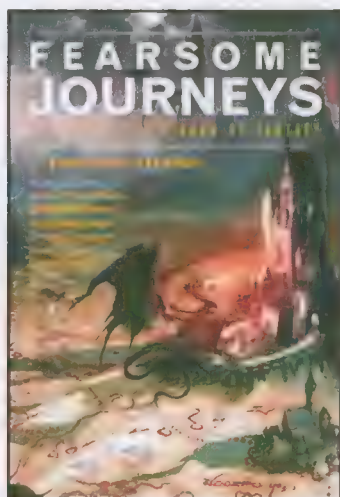
In a sudden temporal jump we find a human man, Ivan Nikolayevich, wandering into Marya's life. In the interim she has become one of Koschei's generals, but the war is going

badly. (The war is always going badly.) Koschei is dismayed as Ivan habitually takes his wives from him. Marya chides him for his attitude and takes Ivan as her lover, despite his confusion. She tells him, “What passes between married people is incomprehensible to outsiders.”

Whatever her title may be, Valente's story is not deathless. Escaping the war in Buyan, Marya chooses to return with Ivan to her childhood home and is shocked that a house in Leningrad is painted with characters from her story. With all the fantastical events that have gone before and come after, though, the impact of the German siege of the city and its attendant horrors of starvation and suffering is lessened. The stripping of wallpaper to make bread, its paste to make butter, are not as horrific, not as devastating, as they could be; as they should be. We have not felt, not been shown, enough of the long, slow descent into abjection and desperation that survival there would have entailed. That Koschei has also turned up and is tethered in the basement only adds to the distancing effect.

An interlude in Yaichka features barely disguised versions of Lenin, Stalin, the last Tsar and his family and a priest with whom his wife may (or not) have had a liaison. Two of these have dreams of a war between red and white ants. Russian history hangs heavily.

The human time span of the novel relates to that of the ascendancy of the “wizard in Moscow with the moustache”. There is the necessity to believe “there has never been another (world)” – “can never be another.” An explicit message is that living under totalitarianism is like death; but a death where “You still have to go to work in the morning. You still have to live.” But, to use one of Valente's repetitions, life is like that.



FEARSOME JOURNEYS

edited by Jonathan Strahan

Solaris pb, 416pp, £7.99

Jo L. Walton

There's something faintly paradoxical about the whole premise. Epic fantasy, but *short* epic fantasy? A further aura of oxymoron attaches to the word *new*. There's newness in the sense that all twelve tales are original for this anthology, but there's also a suggestion of *freshness*. And who really wants to be an early adopter of epic fantasy? Isn't it a bit like keying in a Google Alert for cutting-edge single malt whisky? Isn't *Fearsome Journeys* in jeopardy of falling apart under the stress of its contradictions?

Yet somehow it all hangs together beautifully. A few stories, such as Saladin Ahmed's 'Amethyst, Shadow and Light' and Daniel Abraham's 'The High King Dreaming', achieve a kind of ultra-compressed vastitude: epic.zip. Many stories position themselves as episodes, fragments, or specimens of palimpsestual sprawl. Characters prima donna up and down the pages as though this is *not* their first story and *certainly* won't be their last. This is often literally true; for instance, with the stories from Scott Lynch, Jeffrey Ford and

Glen Cook. Some readers will happily follow these universes sideways into the various other books they exist across. Other readers of course may feel frustrated by all this unruly deferral and scatter. They may find the characters underdeveloped, the settings sketchy, the back-stories oblique. Still other readers (this reviewer included) will actually prefer *not* to have everything spelled out, and particularly not time-honoured fantasy tropes that are accessible via inference and a smidge of genre-savvy mental exertion – The Dominator is *bad*, isn't he?

As for the "new" bit, it doesn't cancel out the priority heroic fantasy gives to the archaic so much as make that priority intelligible in the first place. Old and new, convention and subversion, high and low, heroic and mock heroic – these have always been difficult to disentangle. The courtly love tradition, for instance, mingles private, unspoken and unrequited love of a theological fieriness with prankish subterfuge and slapsticky cuckoldry. Martial chivalry is similarly entwined with pragmatism, cynicism and brutality at its very roots. So what's interesting in *Fearsome Journeys* is not the *fact* that conventions are subverted, nor the fact that subversion is inevitably conducted under the banners of innovation and realism...what's interesting is the specific form and intensity which the subversion takes.

Generally speaking, that form is *grit* and its level is *medium to low*. There's no out-and-out grimdark à la Abercrombie here; this grit typically involves a bit of undaunted erotic and/or scatological glee, in the context of a preoccupied, vague recognition of military and sexual domination as unshakable dimensions of existence. Occasionally that vagueness seems deliberate or even pointed. In Lynch's opener, the spirit of Fritz

Leiber mingles with that of Square Enix: it's obvious that these sorcerers' agenda has *something* to do with strategy, but *everything* to do with which spells have the coolest animations. Ahmed's 'Amethyst, Shadow and Light' is redolent of Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic* or The National Lampoon's *Bored of the Rings* in its sharp rebuff of cod Tolkienesque world-saving. Cook's 'Shaggy Dog Bridge' attains a strange stylistic success as its hard-boiled squaddie-speak harmonises with high fantasy loftiness: clipped expression and dropped words evoke the lacunae of skaldic epics, while the bleak roundabout linguistic doodles of military men (these guys have plenty of time to kill when not killing people) recalls archaic periphrasis. On various levels, I make out the point that people busy with serious things (like massacres) don't always take those things very seriously. In a sense, they don't even always pay that much attention.

It's a fine message, but one which merges easily into something more awkward: the depersonalisation of suffering. For instance, we can all appreciate Ahmed's Hai Hai – a diabolic and foul-mouthed sabre-wielding (doe) rabbit-of-fortune, and the kind of entity one imagines will soon be despatched to gather Hugh Hefner to the hereafter – as one of the anthology's several Strong Female Characters. But what about the gender relations that make such a representation possible in the first place? (Whores as spoils, Hai Hai? – care to say more?) Well-intentioned fiction can get stuck in the same old images of progress: sometimes it's necessary to backtrack a little to find the onward path. Perhaps that's why I took such a shine to the cronecore offerings, Kate Elliott's 'Leaf and Branch and Grass and Vine' and Robert V.S. Redick's 'Forever People.' Elliot's

talé focuses on a sweet little Save the King messenger mission. Anna must cross hostile territory undetected, mainly by walking sort-of near people (like getting into a club). Redick's is a gnarled, queasy-making tale, simultaneously claustrophobic and on a grand scale. It very adroitly ends in the midst of wretched uncertainty. Even though both tales arguably draw on some of epic fantasy's more problematic tropes and stock figures (cunning old woman has deceitful tongue; gender transitioning is emblematic of the Ineffable Eldritch; hick jezebel stashes machete, hikes skirts, etc) they never come across as exploitative. The gender relations they invoke feel insistent and concrete, but also contingent.

The collection's quality seemed pretty even to me, but I might lurchingly pin my rosette on K.J. Parker's 'The Dragonslayer of Merebarton'. There is a sizeable "Yeah, and?"-type risk with adventure yarns; yep, this may all be unabashed escapism, but if you don't escape very *far*, or for very *long*, and can't bring anything back with you...well, why did you bother? Parker's romance is something of a @Seinfeld1200, insofar as (by heroic fantasy standards) nothing really happens – a knight goes to slay a dragon and that's literally *it* – yet it is so breezily, so mesmerically voiced, I couldn't dream of demanding "So what?"

If I have one niggle, it's that I'd have liked some subtle reminder that Parker's charismatic aristo narrator – so crinkly, so put upon, so lacking in disposable income, so ever-so-slightly shellshocked and traumatised, bearing his griefs old and new with wincing and wolfish grins – is a classic strut of a monstrously illiberal and unequal social system. It would be difficult to supply such a hint, of course, without disrupting *that voice*. Nice poshos are the worst. I almost forgot to root for the dragon.



THE BONE SEASON

Samantha Shannon

Bloomsbury hb, 480pp, £12.99

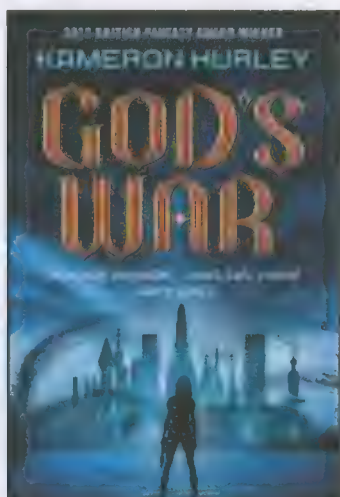
Ian Hunter

The back cover of *The Bone Season* has some complimentary quotes from people like Susan Hill and Andy Serkis, and it's his film company, Imaginarium Studios, who have bought the film rights. The master plan is fitting into place – seven books, film rights sold, and the symbiotic book sales/cinema tickets incestuous feeding frenzy will take care of itself, perhaps, with Bloomsbury back in the good old days (ker-ching) of J.K. Rowling. But it doesn't always work that way. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (also set in Oxford) didn't do the box office business, despite a stellar cast (maybe because they bottled the ending) and various attempts to ignite the *Beautiful Creatures* books and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* trilogy have faltered. Somehow Percy Jackson has stuttered back on to the big screen, but there is always the success of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* as shining examples. Shannon's seven-book series could end up as twelve movies, taking twenty years to film, with the aging lead actors

being CGI-ed to make them look younger.

The Bone Season is a weighty tome, with some essential set-ups before we start, like the family tree showing "The Seven Orders of Clairvoyance", a map of "The Penal Colony of Shoel 1", and a map of the London Underground system with information on how the Underguards can help if you get into difficulty. After several hundred pages of narrative, divided into twenty-nine chapters, we also get a ten-page glossary, describing terms used in the book. Which is handy to have, along with the family tree, because there is a lot going on here in the world of 2059 where Paige Mahoney is a minor criminal, able to read people's minds and let others put the information she gleans to their own use. Then she is snatched and ends up in Oxford to become the property of the mysterious Warden, who is her master and trainer, and also an alien being known as a Rephaim whose kind came to Earth two hundred years ago, hence the Victoriana/steam-punk feel to the novel. But the Rephaim did not cross over alone and they have become mankind's protectors in the battle against the Buzzers. Voyants such as Paige can be trained to fight this other-worldly war but Paige, of course, has other ideas about how she would like her life to pan out.

Likened to *The Hunger Games* (which I think it is a cousin of), the *Twilight* series, *The Handmaid's Tale*, even *A Clockwork Orange*, and, inevitably, J.K. Rowling, *The Bone Season* is uniquely its own, and an impressive piece of world-building, and, while I'm in no way the target market for this novel, I hope it's successful enough for the entire seven-book series to come to fruition, and they let me out of the nursing home to catch the final movie in the series.



GOD'S WAR

Kameron Hurley

Del Rey tpb, 309pp, £12.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

Originally published in the US in 2011, Kameron Hurley's *God's War* belatedly arrives in the UK already clutching a British Fantasy Society award as well as a nomination for the BFA's Best Novel award. It has also attracted some very vocal admirers from among SF readers. *God's War* seems to be one of those novels that was very much in tune with the SF zeitgeist when it was first published, yet I struggle to understand precisely why this is so. It is not that *God's War* is a bad novel – indeed, there is much about it to admire – but I find it deeply problematic.

The focus is Nyx, a young woman who is a former government assassin, or bel dame, but who now works as a bounty hunter, leading a group of mercenaries who dispense state-sanctioned summary justice. The reader is given to understand that Nasheen is a demanding country in which to live, and it polices itself accordingly. It also demands much of its citizens. The planet Umayma, of which Nasheen is part, appears

to have been populated by an intergalactic Islamic diaspora – the circumstances of this are not made clear, and contacts with offworlders are few, and discouraged. The countries of Umayma turn inward. Some of them are at war with one another and have been for what seems like centuries, the reasons either forgotten or simply not mentioned.

Of the participants in this holy war, Nasheen's is a matriarchal culture; every aspect of life is focused on the business of war. Men are sent to the front and allowed only to return once they reach the age of forty, assuming they last that long. Once they return they remain subordinate to women. It is a civil duty among the women to bear children in order to raise the next generation but, other than that, they are free to run their lives as they wish. Some choose to be mothers while the rest take on other jobs, as they choose. Foreign men are frequently disturbed to find themselves harassed in the streets by drunk and violent women, much as they might themselves treat women in their own countries.

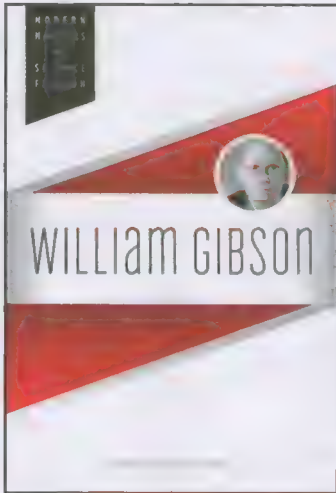
One might begin to suspect that *God's War* should be read as some sort of role-reversal feminist commentary, harking back to a time when women writers were trying to imagine what a world might look like were it not run by men. In part, the novel might be just that, given Hurley apparently intended Nyx to be a response to a question posed by Michael Moorcock in *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (1987): why is there no female Conan? But Umayma is no Hyboria, and Nyx is a far more nuanced creation than Howard's barbarian swordsman. On the other hand, she certainly does not balk at extreme violence, but Hurley is by no means inviting us

to consider the mind-numbing effects of so much casual brutality, any more than I believe she is attempting a feminist novel. This, simply, is how Umayma is.

In the end, however, violence can get us only so far. The plot, when it finally gets going, enables us to experience certain other aspects of Umayma in greater detail, in particular the odd bug technology that is the novel's most unusual feature, along with the insistence that things we take for granted, such as electricity, have somehow fallen under the purview of 'magicians'. At this point too, we see perhaps a little more clearly the complex web of only half-admitted emotional attachments that bind this ill-assorted group of mercenaries together. At times, Hurley over-sentimentalises the tentative relationship developing between Nyx and Rhys, the barely competent magician from Chenja, framed as two people who barely know how to articulate their thoughts about one another yet who are clearly drawn to one another.

In a way, their relationship provides a metonym for the entire novel. It's raw, jagged, not always terribly well-articulated. So much about this story is left unsaid, not as a narrative ploy but because no one seems to know. The infrastructure required to support a war seems not to exist; one might almost doubt the war's existence as well. The bug technology, attractive as it is, relies on the reader's connivance to work at all, and nothing seems to quite hang together.

And yet, having said all that, there is still an odd energy about the novel that draws me back. I don't particularly like it but it is not a novel that asks to be liked. It is a novel that asks not to be ignored, which is a challenge to the reader, and all the more interesting for that!



WILLIAM GIBSON

Gary Westfahl

Modern Masters of Science Fiction, University of Illinois Press, 224pp, \$23 pb/\$85 cloth

Paul Graham Raven

One grows accustomed to books that promise much and deliver little, but when the book in question is a career retrospective of William Gibson, you'd be forgiven for having high hopes. After all, Gibson was an instrumental part of the cyberpunk revolution – a revolution rapidly assimilated back into the skiffy mainstream, admittedly, and a label that Gibson was always uneasy about – and is among the thinkers who've shaped, if not the world we live in today, then the language with which we discuss that world. How could one fail to find interesting things to say?

Westfahl's text suffers the perennial problem of critical works by writers rooted in old-guard fandom: the need to not just celebrate great writers as originating in the generic coffin, but to nail them into it forever, like ageing punks spuriously tracing the lineage of any half-way worthy band all the way back to the Sex Pistols. The jacket copy promises discussions of "more than eighty virtually unknown Gibson publications

from his early years"; these are fanzine nuggets which Gibson himself dismisses as juvenilia, and do little beyond delineating a few years of fanac preceding an oft-avowed frustration with (and eventual abandoning of) the SF culture of his time. To Westfahl, though, these texts mark Gibson as One Of Ours in perpetuity – and he'll reshape both Gibson and the coffin if it'll help him keep the lid on.

He begins by trying to crowbar Gibson into the shadow of Heinlein, because...um, well, they both brought a few genre-specific advances in technique (both developed contemporary styles that avoided infodump) and they both stuck to their principles (even if Gibson's principles are in many cases diametrically opposed to those of Heinlein). Westfahl runs out of steam on this idea before he's done talking about the *Sprawl* trilogy, but the ghost of Uncle Bob gets raised again in the conclusion, as if the similarities were both obvious and profoundly telling.

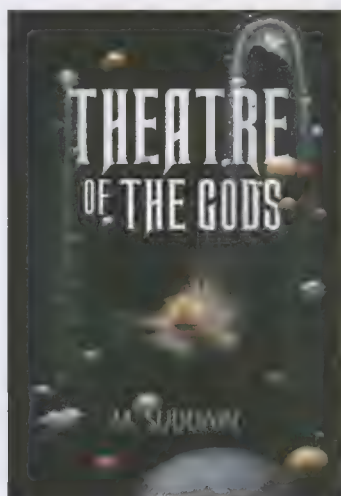
Later, Westfahl ties himself in knots over the Bigend books as he tries to have his cake and eat it, listing every passing pop-culture reference in *Zero History* with the slightest sci-fi flavour in order to show that Gibson has reached rapprochement with the genre, then conceding that perhaps it's a reflection of the ubiquity of skiffy imagery in contemporary mass culture, before concluding that said ubiquity surely indicates that SF Was Right! The evidence suggests otherwise, though: that the mainstream has won (by filching the tools and ditching the dogma), and that skiffy's greatest triumph is in manning the ghetto wall while wailing that it woz The Mainstream Man wot walled them in, like Randian preppers awaiting the pinko plebocalypse. While one can cherry-pick from Gibson's interviews to suggest otherwise,

the full quotes show unambiguously that Gibson cares nothing for sf as a culture, and little for it as a literature. Fandom's wishful conflation of the two somehow transmutes his ambivalence into a sort of sleeper-agent status: Codename Heinlein, awaiting his activation signal.

Westfahl has other axes to grind. His distaste for Bruce Sterling radiates from discussions of his Gibson collaborations, for example. Then there's his theory that Gibson loathes academics and trolls them relentlessly through his portrayals of characters from intellectual milieus. But Westfahl also claims that certain shifts of theme or trope from novel to novel were clearly prompted by Gibson absorbing critical receptions of his work and adjusting his output to please them. So which is it? It's neither, of course; in the "exclusive" interview near the back of the book, Gibson responds to Westfahl's critic-trolling theory with a resounding "nah".

There will surely be people who concur with Westfahl's reading far more closely than my own – a very postmodern position for me to take, I know – but I could perhaps have forgiven the parochial anti-intellectualism if Westfahl hadn't achieved the impossible, and made Gibson seem boring. In the final paragraph of his conclusion, Westfahl writes of Gibson: "[h]e is keenly interested in certain things, and pursues those interests regardless of what others think, while making necessary concessions to market demands"; a graveside eulogy for an unloved travelling salesman.

For all its claims to being definitive, I suspect (and hope) that the academic critiques of Gibson which Westfahl so resents will garner many more citations than this book; they're just as subjective, but they've a damned sight more to say.



THEATRE OF THE GODS

M. Suddain

Jonathan Cape hb, 622pp, £12.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

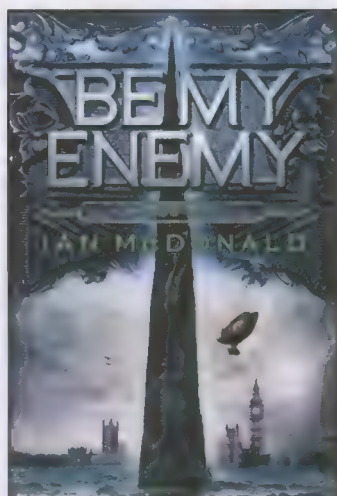
Subtitled "Being the story of M. Francisco Fabregas: explorer, physicist, transmariner, who travelled beyond the borders of his universe, was shipwrecked there... and returned", this is an intimidating brick of a tome.

However, appearances can be deceptive. Dressed up as an absurdist comedy (with elements of tragedy) in the grand tradition of Adams and Pratchett, nevertheless this is an extremely literate and very clever story, albeit one that isn't satisfied to take a conventional storytelling route. It tells the tale of the maverick scientific heretic, dimensional explorer and wild-haired lunatic M. Francisco Fabregas on his quest to travel to an alternate universe, the one that resides just beside our own. He has been commanded by the Queen, and is accompanied by the famous starship captain, the Necronaut (aka Lambestyo), who is actually a teenager, the Vengeance (a young girl), a Router (young deaf boy), and a fleet of warships. Mix into that the wonders of the multiverse, the Dark

Hand (a kind of benign secret society), and a dastardly villain called The Man in the Shadows who wishes to usurp the Queen's rule by supplanting her with her creepy sisters, and who is also currently seeking the Vengeance as she carries with her a document that would expose his plans and plots.

It's a superficially simple plot but beneath its obvious charms as a species of future steampunk and a plain old simple space romp there's a solid framework of science, philosophy, psychology and clever wordplay holding it all together. The narrative is deliberately confusing at times, obfuscating and occulting, and all the characters have their secrets. Furthermore, it is littered with ruminations on various aspects of what it is to be human and on the philosophical implications of what they're undertaking. Fabregas claims to have already visited another dimension (which is what got him into trouble initially), but his character is open to question and doubt, and therefore so are his utterances. The narrative as presented to us is already second-hand, through the literary device of an interviewer transcribing the man's experiences. In amongst the chuckles, we are encouraged to look at what underlies reality and how we perceive it, and how we experience it and interact with it – that's a tricky proposition for anyone to undertake in the first place, let alone as successfully as this.

This is a delightful book, full of surreal twists and turns of invention and humour, written in a breezy and engaging manner. Not, however, a book to be skimmed or read casually in an afternoon, as there are multiple layers here that deserve one's full attention to divine and properly understand. If you like your comedy and tragedy mixed with high-concept sf, then this is for you.



BE MY ENEMY

Ian McDonald

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 374pp, £16.99

Paul F. Cockburn

There's a worry, jumping into a series with its second or later volumes, that, as a reader, you'll flounder among characters and situations already established and explored in the previous novels; or worse, simply not fully appreciate their significance without some pretty horrendous (and, for some, unnecessary) info-dumping. With *Be My Enemy*, the second Everness book, Ian McDonald manages to create an effective "new readers start here" opening with an attention-grabbing first chapter which ends with an impressive change of scene to hook new readers while spin-bowling a surprise to readers of the first volume, *Planesrunner*.

That, though, is one of the advantages of setting your story within a multiverse, where people's alternative selves – "alters" – can be sufficiently different to become both the story's protagonist and antagonist. True, McDonald doesn't make it easy for new readers; a lot has clearly already happened beforehand to get geeky physics genius Everett Singh from home in Stoke Newington

to the crew of the now alternate-universe-jumping airship *Everness*. But that's fine, there are enough hints of the back story placed through the novel for you to work out most of it.

Everett's kidnapped father, Tejendra, was a physicist who helped open Heisenberg Gates to other "parallel" universes or planes. He was also the first to create the Infundibulum, a seven-dimensional map of all the planes, which Everett is (possibly uniquely) able to read and use; wired up to a "jump gun", this enables the *Everness* to jump between different versions of Earth. However, possessing such a map – and an ability to read it – is viewed as potentially highly dangerous by the faction that looks to control and exploit access between universes. Which is why *Everness*, and Everett in particular, are being hunted down.

While the alternative versions of London and Oxford range from merely interesting to really frightening – most particularly, the quarantined E1, the first Earth to break the barriers between universes – the strength in this novel is Everett's new opponent, one of his own alters. Everett M is a similarly geeky teenager, though not gifted with the instinct to interpret a seven-dimensional map of the multiverse. In many respects, though, he is exactly the same character, so the point is how he is forced by circumstances beyond his control to make different decisions and choices, at least one of which could be potentially apocalyptic. But then he has been almost killed, then turned into a deadly cyborg by the multiverse-spanning faction represented by the fascistic Charlotte Villiers.

McDonald's writing is succinct, sharp and effective. He also gives us a satisfying emotional conclusion, even though it's clear much more is still to come in Book III.



INVOCATION

Jo L. Walton

Critical Documents tpb, 592pp, £11.99

Peter Loftus

Fans of award-winning author Jo Walton might be asking themselves how they have never heard of *Invocation* before. The answer is simple: it is by an entirely different writer – novelist, editor, pseudonym constructor and poet Jo Lindsay Walton (also a recent addition to the *Interzone* reviews team).

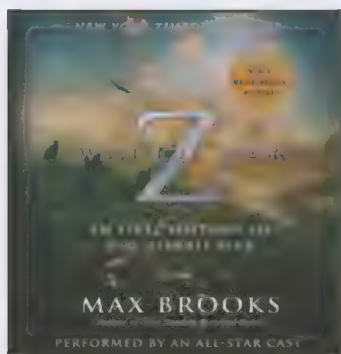
Invocation is an urban fantasy that tells the story of teenager Myfanwy Morris and BFF Kitty. It is three months before Myfanwy's eighteenth birthday and the most pressing concerns for the pair are events in their social sphere. However, there is a bigger story to be told and one with higher stakes than what the girls are going to do that weekend. Events quickly leave the realm of the normal and before long the girls are dragged into the affairs of the uber-mysterious Chancelhouse agency as it endeavours to rebrand itself for the 21st century. All of which might not make too much sense, and it isn't guaranteed that reading *Invocation* is going to help much...

Invocation reads like the literary equivalent of space dust (the candy

as opposed to the cosmic debris). It is a hyperactive, hyper-real barrage that sometimes lifts the reader like a tidal wave of Red Bull and at other times threatens to deluge them under the sheer weight of mass media reference and kaleidoscopic happenstance. Walton knows how to prise open the shell of popular culture and simultaneously get inside the heads of Myfanwy and Kitty, but does it so successfully that it makes for a difficult read. Imagine bringing a carload of teenage girls back from a party. One of them is vomiting into the glove box. Another has stolen her mother's uppers and is trying to stick her top half out the sunroof. A third is sulking and using a lighter to burn holes in the upholstery, and her friend is blaring tinny pop pap via her iPhone. Yes, the girls feel shriekingly real, even if in a slightly cartoonish sense, but that doesn't necessarily mean you'd want to spend twenty hours around them.

Invocation is a postmodern fantasy that reads like Neil Gaiman on crack. Walton creates a threatening world governed by forces that have scant disregard for its inhabitants, and evokes the claustrophobia of an age where all information is a web search away and people can talk, text and chew gum at the same time. It is a funny, inventive and acerbic critique of life in the information age. Some might feel that Walton's use of cultural reference is overly liberal and the hallucinatory narrative presents obstacles as the reader tries to find a frame of reference to cling to.

As the plot develops, Myfanwy discovers that she is in fact a muse, capable of superhuman feats, both intellectual and physical. She is more than that though. She is Walton's muse too and our guide on a playful yet deadly serious examination of contemporary culture. The engine is running...



WORLD WAR Z: THE COMPLETE EDITION

Max Brooks

Random House Audio, 10×CD, \$25.00

Stephen Theaker

Most readers will know the story of *World War Z*, if not from the bestselling novel or midselling movie then from dozens of films with precisely the same conceit. The dead reanimate, they bite humans, humans die, become zombies, and the plague spreads across the world, leaving humanity devastated. There's nothing unusual about these zombies: they don't run, talk, think, use tools or mutate. What makes *World War Z* so special is how it methodically builds a big picture from dozens of individually affecting snapshots; and examines not just one plucky band of survivors as they are gnawed off one by one, but the world as a whole; and displays the author's careful consideration of how our own world would respond to a zombie plague – and might possibly survive it.

Max Brooks (who is here all at once, rather dizzily, the actual author, the fictional author of the report from which these interviews are drawn, and the actual actor playing the fictional author as he interviews survivors) takes us through each stage of the conflict: isolated outbreaks in rural communities and hospitals; rumours of unstoppable crazed

cannibals; doomed efforts to stop the spread; flight from the cities; desperate attempts to avoid our total extermination; establishing safe zones; and finally, fighting back on land, air and – in an example of the clever through-thinking that typifies the book – sea, because, years after the land war is over, millions of zombies still roam the oceans, ready to swarm up the legs of oil rigs.

Even those who have read the book will find the audiobook rewarding. Hearing the voices, accents, ages and genders of interviewees adds nuance and impact to their stories. The packaging lists the forty actors involved – including Alfred Molina, Parminder Nagra and Simon Pegg, to pick out a few from the UK – but not who they play, and recognisable voices can nigger at first till identified. More positively, that lets the characters speak for themselves, and the uniformly excellent performances smooth over cornier aspects of the book: a line about atheists in foxholes irritated in print, but here is in character instead of feeling like a cliché. And even the book's corniest moments can be moving: listeners may be tempted to sing a verse of 'God Save the Queen' after the Windsor Castle sequence. It's odd to feel an ersatz pride in events that haven't happened, but that's part of the book's appeal.

The book spans twelve hours, and halfway through listeners may wonder how much more is needed, but the aftermath proves as fascinating as the disaster. And by that point listeners will have found their answers to an odd question posed by the set: what are we listening to? Recordings of the interviews, supposedly, but when people slam hands on desks or chat on baseball fields the noises are reported by the interviewer. And it's all very composed; interviewees talk at length with

only occasional prodding from Brooks. They could be semi-staged interviews, with survivors reading prepared statements, but the descriptions of interview settings work against that interpretation. Instead, this is theoretically a post-war audiobook version, with actors who survived playing the roles of the interviewees. That's peculiar, but it's comforting to think that the zombies won't get Alan Alda.

In *Interzone* #247, Nick Lowe noted that the book can be read as a series of short stories, and the reason both book and audiobook succeed is that those stories are very good, with high stakes, unexpected twists, interesting character developments and a remarkable variety of settings and viewpoints. It's surprising for an American entertainment product to pay as much attention to international events as to those in the US; this isn't from the *Independence Day* school of ten-second check-ins per continent. A soldier who fought in the calamitous, chaotic battle of Yonkers, a Japanese otaku taking days to work his way down the balconies of an apartment block, an officer on a Chinese nuclear submarine: each has a unique experience of the war, yet there are always echoes of other speakers. Stories overlap and fill in details. Though Max tells us at the outset that the war with the zombies is over (even as he warns his fictional listeners to avoid complacency), that does nothing to lessen the tension as each character recounts their horrifying experiences.

When extravagance and a huge budget are applied with intelligence and artistic integrity in pursuit of quality, we all win, and this superb, gripping audiobook with its astonishing cast is another example. A film seems redundant in the face of such a complete and perfect adaptation as this.



ECTOPIA

Martin Goodman

Barbican Press tpb, 272pp, £12.99

Barbara Melville

Ectopia sounded rich and edgy from its cover blurb alone, promising themes of gender, medicine and identity – topics I loved to see explored in speculative fiction. The book lived up to my expectations, with just a few minor caveats. *Ectopia* is a terrific novel with excellent characterisation, world-building, narration and dialogue. It's also thematically strong, exploring the connections between binary concepts, including male versus female, gay versus straight, and soulful versus soulless. The result is a story of great depth, raising questions about who we are and how we define ourselves. But as strong as this story is, it misses the mark in a few places.

The main narrator and viewpoint character is Steven Sickie, a perceptive and spirited teenager. He records his experiences in a dark, near-future dystopia where the Earth's surface temperature has soared, and either by result or coincidence, females aren't being born. This world and its plot are vessels for a character-



driven tale of Steven's family. His twin sister

Karen is the world's youngest living female, making her an object of desire and medical worship. Their relationship offers an intriguing contrast, as Steven is what the world wants the least: a homosexual male who will not reproduce. He describes the significance of their births: "We marked triumph and disaster, the beginning and the end".

His other family play important roles. The computer-obsessed brother Paul lurks in the background, without a twin to play off: "Our little brother Paul wasn't family. He was his own thing, a blob of baby. [...] He was like a stain you got used to". Then there's the detached but gentle mother: "Mom's everything and nothing all at once. She's a raft bobbing lost in an ocean and she's the ocean too. It starts off safe when she holds you in her arms then it feels like sinking and drowning". And the disturbing and ruthless father: "You don't answer back to Dad. Not when he's in drek mode. The drink turns to fire in his stomach and the fire smokes his brain". The book follows the whole family, depicting the disturbing connections between them as they come to realise the terrifying truth: a mysterious authority is watching them. Do they hold the key to solving this fertility crisis?

By far the best thing about this book is its narration. As with *A Clockwork Orange* and *1984*, the world is built by language, meaning there is little cumbersome exposition or other authorial intrusions. Steven is a brilliant narrator with a thrilling tale to tell. His language sculpts this reality in a striking,

penetrating way, often combining beautiful observations with cutting colloquial realism: "A frenzy of dots, all different colors, like a cosmos of stars, filled the room in the night. I watched em shift in and out of shapes. Then they licked into flames, blue with orange flashes. People ran through em. Not silhouettes coz it was all 3D, these were more like ghosts waiting for substance. They ran through the flames and I watched them ignite. Their screams were notes of beautiful music".

This book also has something I don't see very often: dialogue which is skilfully executed and worked smoothly into the narrative. All speech is prefaced by dashes rather than quote marks, which is appropriate for a recorded document: whoever or whatever has transcribed the recordings can't be completely sure who said what. I therefore applaud Goodman for not using speech dialogue, as this would have felt artificial, distracting from the reading experience.

But I said *Ectopia* just missed, and there are three reasons why: one, the climate change element isn't integral or really necessary, making for a distraction. Two: I also had some issues with pace and structure, with the first half of the book feeling like a thriller in slow motion. But my third and main issue is with the character of Steven. In spite of him being consistent and believable, it was difficult to care for him. When someone constantly goes on about piss and dirt and jerking off, it does colour my view. Of course, a likeable narrator isn't always requisite when characters are intriguing – the father being the perfect example. But this was Steven's story, and relating to him could have strengthened the immersion, making it harder to let go of him once I read that final page.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

3.

An Eternal and Meaningless Now.

Our ability to imagine the future has long been constrained by the assumption that it must in some way resemble the past. Rather than treating the past as a series of random events, humanity has created a number of techniques it uses to distance itself from life's perpetual chaos. By stepping back from the day-to-day and looking at an abstracted 'bigger picture' we are able to see through the apparent chaos of existence and detect underlying patterns and laws. For the Christian, that law is based upon God's infinite love for a flawed human nature. For the Marxist, that law is economic and it explains why capitalism must rise and fall before we can hope to achieve true socialism. These increasingly complex techniques and systems have allowed us to cloak the world in story and the stories we create ensure that everything always makes sense... if only in hindsight.

Given that humanity has been telling stories about the past since the birth of language, it is perhaps unsurprising that we should resort to these tried and tested narrative techniques whenever we come to think of the future. While science fiction has always been somewhat ambivalent about the idea that history might have some predetermined end point, the genre

does seem to assume that if we are aware of the laws governing human civilisation then we should be able to imagine what society might come to resemble if allowed to develop along a particular path. This approach to the future is evident not only in much of H.G. Wells' futurism and Olaf Stapledon's *The Last and First Men*, but also Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, an epic future history about a human society shaped by awareness of the laws governing human civilisation. It is interesting to note that while the *Foundation* series takes place entirely in the distant future, its stories were directly inspired by *History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbons' attempt to impose some sort of narrative order on Roman history. Though other works of science fiction tend to be less brazen in their historicity, the techniques used to create these epic futurities are the same as those used to create the nightmare spires of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the rape-infected space colonies of Joanna Russ's *We Who Are About To...* We recognise these writings as great (or at least substantial) works of science fiction because we have been trained to expect futures that resemble the ordered mechanical systems of the past. But what if the future is

not like the past? What if it more closely resembles the present?

To walk down a British high street is to drown in a thousand incongruous images: Shop windows are filled with suits designed to make office workers feel as though they are going to work in a contemporary TV producer's idea of a 1960s advertising agency. Cafés staffed by men sporting the facial hair of Edwardian circus performers bring Ethiopian coffee to Filipino nurses in cups that were made in South Korea but inspired by a 1940s British fashion for 'real' China porcelain. Dead people write books, dead people release albums and every cinema is clogged with fifth-generation reinventions of intellectual properties made in different times for different people. Don't like Captain Kirk and Superman returning to the 1980s to re-fight the same old villains? Don't worry... give it enough time and someone will come along and reimagine Christopher Nolan's adaptation of Frank Miller's response to the campy 1960s TV adaptation of a 1930s comic book. The odd thing about the incoherent deluge of contemporary culture is not that it is filled with old ideas but that so many of these ideas appear to have been lifted directly from other times and places. The problem is



not a surplus of old ideas but a lack of interest in the broader cultural stories that once made these objects meaningful.

The American theorist and critic Fredric Jameson explains this phenomenon by arguing that it is in the nature of capitalism to strip cultural artefacts from their original cultural contexts and turn them into commodities that are easy to market and easy to buy into. For example, while yoga may well have been developed as one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, it is sold to Westerners as a set of vaguely 'exotic' stretching exercises. It is easier to sell stretching exercises and special yoga pants than it is to sell the benefits of a series of physical, mental and spiritual practices designed to help people achieve some sense of union with the divine. In order to sell yoga to a wider Western audience, it was necessary to discard the stories that once made those practices meaningful. This is why you do not need to be a 1960s advertising executive or an Edwardian strongman to wax your moustache or wear a pale blue suit. Capitalism crawls through the wreckage of human civilisation ripping objects from their original life-worlds and re-packaging them for new and broader audiences. You do not need to know where any of these objects came from or what they were meant to the people who originally invented them... you only need the money to buy them.

As brutal and exploitative as this process of deconstruction may appear when framed in purely commercial terms, it is the exact same process that is used by adventurous writers to subvert traditional narratives and rescue good ideas from bad values. Indeed, what are Iain M. Banks's *Culture* novels if not an attempt to wrench space opera from the American cultural

hubris that birthed it? What is Aliette de Bodard's Nebula and Locus Award-winning short story 'Immersion' if not an attempt to take a conceptual vocabulary created by white people and use it to explain how it feels to grow up in a culture that sees white people as inherently superior? For good and ill, capitalism and postmodernism have boiled away the narratives of human culture leaving us with nothing but a jumble of disconnected and beautiful objects experienced as an eternal and meaningless now. There is no greater articulation of this disjointed present than the books of M. John Harrison's *Kefahuchi Tract* series.

Harrison's novels describe a universe in which a restless and squalid humanity have washed up near the event horizon of a perverse and inexplicable knot in the weave of reality. However, aside from *Light* and *Empty Space* using different timeframes to suggest some sort of causal connection between *Now* and *Then*, Harrison pointedly refuses to use any of the techniques that we have come to associate with the creation of good and/or substantial speculative futures. Where are the recognisable social trends? Where are the exaggerated familiar objects suggesting deeper patterns of continuity and relevance? In Harrison's novels, the rippling newness of a sentient spaceship sits comfortably besides the shop-worn jet age futurism of a pink Cadillac while genetically engineered master races lose themselves in *Matrix*-style recreations of 1940s crime novels filled with the same dusty bars and down-at-heel private eyes as the real world of the novels. The difference between the *Kefahuchi Tract* and a lot of contemporary genre fiction is that while works such as Justina Robson's *Quantum Gravity* series or the videogame

franchise *Fallout* may feature anachronistic and genre-blending elements, the presence of these incongruities is invariably explained with reference to some past event. Harrison not only refuses to account for his subversive postmodernity, he actually embraces radical incoherence by having different books in the series contradict each other whilst also maintaining that all systems of abstract knowledge are apparently equally true. Far from being a product of sloppy world-building or a childish subversion of audience expectations, Harrison's *Kefahuchi Tract* is an attempt to construct an entirely different kind of science fictional future... one that resembles the present far more than it resembles the past.

Science fiction eagerly embraced postmodernity and the feelings of flatness and depthlessness that accompany it. Sceptical of cultural narratives and shameless in its capacity for cultural appropriation, much of what we think of as contemporary science fiction is little more than pastiche, homage and nostalgia: What if the red shirts in *Star Trek* became aware that the writers of the show were trying to kill them? What if someone wrote about a colonised solar system in the style of John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*? Science fiction is very good at wrenching ideas from their original contexts but the tendency to transform these spoils into worlds that make sense (an impulse Harrison once referred to as the "clomping foot of nerdism") has served only to separate SF from the present and bind it to the past. Over the next few columns I plan to look at forms of literature that fully embrace the idea that our future will feel more like the chaotic high street of present than it will the manicured gardens of the past.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

PACIFIC RIM

PERCY JACKSON: SEA OF MONSTERS

KICK-ASS 2

THE WOLVERINE

MONSTERS UNIVERSITY

PLANES

THE WALL

ELYSIUM

THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS: CITY OF BONES

THE WORLD'S END



PACIFIC RIM

At the end of this summer of stumbling behemoths, it's easy to feel that Hollywood's own Jaeger programme is in crisis. The studios' blockbuster strategy of building monsters to fight monsters has opened up a global invasion of cyclopean cinematic kaiju which need to knock over cities all round the Pacific basin to feed their overlords; but 2013 was the year the giant machines were overwhelmed by the scale of the invasion of IMAX-pumping, 3D-pooing titans belching out of the rift to lay waste to the planet. Everything has underperformed, franchises are under threat, and the fates of whole universes are in the balance. But at least it's been a golden memorial summer for the legacy of Ray Harryhausen, who died just a month short of the sixtieth anniversary of his feature debut *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*: that still-astonishing prototype of the modern monster movie west and east which single-handedly wrote the manual for creature effects down into the digital age, directly inspired Ishiro Honda's *Gojira* the following year, and is homaged now, with Harryhausen and Honda joint dedicatees, in Guillermo del Toro's latest love-letter to the *Famous Monsters* golden age that made him.

Originally a spec project from Travis Beacham, the first writer on the *Clash of the Titans* remake that kicked off the current wave of digital Harryhausen tributes, **PACIFIC RIM** is really a consolation prize for both writer and director, who worked together on

Beacham's unmade faerie gumshoe noir *Killing on Carnival Row*, and reunited after del Toro's passion project *At the Mountains of Madness* fell apart in its turn. The pitch-friendly concept, essentially *Transformers* v *Godzilla* in IMAX, turns out to produce something at once far less strange than expected from del Toro and yet still several notches stranger than studio summer monsters are ever expected to be – opening like the middle film of a trilogy whose opening instalment is briskly recapped like an entry from a dream journal in a what-the-hell ten-minute prologue, and with one of Beacham's trademark dense background mythologies that nobody but the filmmakers have leisure to appreciate.

The film's central problem is that it's found it difficult to come up with an actual plot as thrilling as its concept, and has had to bolt one together from narrative spare parts out of Roland Emmerich's backlot skip. So Charlie Hunnam's hotshot Jaeger pilot has lost a brother in combat and retired from the program because "I can't have anyone else in my head again", till he meets his psychic soulmate in Shakespearean patriarch Idris Elba's hot Japanese foster-daughter and demonstrates the elementary structures of Hollywood kinship (under which the exchange of women is a zero-sum contest to the death between suitor and father, with all other family erased before battle is joined). Both display their masculinity by showing off their skills at delivering unutterable lines like



PERCY JACKSON

"Do not let my calm demeanour fool you!" and "All that time living in the past, I never really thought about the future till now". Bathos and sublimity duke it out through a succession of gorgeous creature designs and incomprehensibly staged battles, until the iron rule of Chekhov's dimensional portal kicks in that if a rift in spacetime opens up to cosmic pits of cyclopean nightmare, in the third act a bloke in a robot suit must without fail convey a thermonuclear device through and blow them to many-angled smithereens – even if the brief glimpses of the kaiju home dimension aren't nearly as Lovecraftian and woah-inducing as del Toro fans might have hoped. Still, it would need a heart of steel to resist such an open love-letter to the power of monster cinema to unite the world and heal the rifts in its heart; and being the first film to title itself after its business model has proved triumphantly prophetic now that the Chinese market has enabled it to stomp into the black and a likely sequel. Ray would be pleased.

With what is essentially a paraphrase of the same title, and even an encore for del Toro's lucky charm Ron Perlman as a *Sinbad*-riffing cyclops, the Harryhausen legacy is no less deeply felt in **PERCY JACKSON: SEA OF MONSTERS**: a sequel few expected to see after Chris Columbus' 2010 woodchipper job on the first volume of Rick Riordan's ADHD-rocking junior theomachy. This similarly free reimagining of the second volume,



KICK-ASS 2

now twerking a funky colon in place of the Potteresque conjunction and article, retains the core cast of increasingly geriatric teens while dispensing with the services of all the first film's expensive adult stars (including Percy's mom, who here seems to have abandoned him to stay at summer camp year-round). Like Dumbledore before him, nobody seems to notice that Chiron the mentor centaur has become suddenly not Irish, Pierce Brosnan having been supplanted by the much more affordable Tony Head; and as in the first film a completely new ending has been bussed in for those whose attention deficit can't wait another six years for the series villain to make a personal appearance, especially after we've already seen him strut his fiery stuff in *Wrath of the Titans*. (Fortunately this film inhabits a certification band where being devoured alive by fiery primordial gods is reversible with no ill effects.) It's actually not at all bad as a cherrypicker harvest of highlights from the book, even supplementing the novel's own amusing transplant of the fantasy archipelago of the *Odyssey* and *Argonautica* to the Bermuda Triangle with a new sequence homaging Lucian's *True History*, and making the most of the gods' invisibility in this volume to vamp on Percy's angst over his absent dad. ("Nice not talking to you. Again.") The ending restores the book's forward-looking twist, so a further instalment isn't off the cards – though fans of the books will remember that the series deadline is Percy's sixteenth



THE WOLVERINE

birthday, which even with the aged-up extension to twenty in the films will be pushing it given that Percy's buddies will be turning thirty. But Spidey has already crossed that line in the dirt, so perhaps the gods and monsters will oblige.

KICK-ASS 2 has dealt with a more severe version of the same challenge head-on, by moving the action of Mark Millar's own sequels four years on to keep Chloë Moretz in play when her people are no longer interested in marketing her in preteen roles. How Dave Lizewski and his pals come to be still in high school is therefore a bit of a puzzler, but in most respects this as close as anyone could reasonably get to a sequel that marries the best of the Millar/Romita follow-up volumes to the best of Matthew Vaughn and Jane Goldman's original film. Merely to see that wonderful cast, few of whom needed this gig, reunited is a treat in itself, with Clark Duke in particular running away with his extended encore as Marty/Battle Guy; and though it's a pity to lose the twelveness of Millar's Hit-Girl, who's come so brilliantly into her own in the comic sequels, there's actually nothing in the *Hit-Girl* interquel (composed here quite well with the storyline of the first six and a bit issues of the second *Kick-Ass* itself) that doesn't play just as well with mid-teens. While it's possible to quibble up just a bit at the chaste Mindy/Dave romance that the film introduces, it's more than offset by the embrace of Mindy's *Mean*



MONSTERS UNIVERSITY

Girls arc as about teenage girls' – not least teenage actresses' – right to resist being judged, moulded, and sexualised. Moretz and her horrible Hollywood-cute grin have been badly overpromoted since her breakout in the first film launched her into a series of die-for parts which would mostly have been better without her; but Hit-Girl is the one role she still absolutely aces, even in the necessarily reconceived version here, and everyone else is great alongside. So much of the comics' point lies in the inversion of the sidekick relationship, with Hit-Girl's insultingly effortless theft of the show from the title character, that it's easy to overlook Aaron Taylor-Johnson's own continuing brilliance in his role. Even Jim Carrey is excellent, and like his character seems to find the mask liberating; until his brief unmasking, you'd never know it was him.

Jeff Wadlow got the script-and-directing gig from a spec adaptation, and like the first film (and indeed the earlier Vaughn/Goldman adaptation *Stardust*) he manages to find a sweetness that isn't in the source but brings out the flavours more richly on screen. The result is tonally different from the comics, but the jokes still work, sometimes even better: a live-action dog in a mask is internet-grade hilarious in a way a comics one can never be, and there are lines that catch Millar's voice so well that you'd hardly believe he didn't write them. ("All that homophobic shit makes you sound super gay.") Even the projectile diarrhoea is there for a rea-



PLANES

son (in the comic, Mindy just dangles the queen bitch off a building, which gets the job done but fails as a social victory); and if the earnest reminders that comics and life play to different rules and different stakes have been served up more economically in the darker *Defendor* and *Super*, Carrey's high-minded flounce over the promotion of gun violence seems to forget that his own character's gun is kept pointedly unloaded, while all his fellow heroes tool up with more traditional forms of blunt and edged weaponry instead. The first film was independently funded, so the full trilogy isn't at all out of the question if the stars are still up for forgoing their market worth in another three years. Even Kick-Ass himself is only six months older than Percy Jackson, and there's only one more volume to get through. It would be a shame not to.

With Millar himself now advising Fox on the creative management of their jealously guarded stable of key Marvel properties, the Fox/Mouse tensions between rival dimensions of the Marvel cosmos are escalating into full-on universe wars, as the frayed triple strands of the X-Men cinema canon (the original trilogy, the aborted *Origins* brand of solo outings, and the *First Class* team reboot) weave back together for Bryan Singer's *Days of Future Past*, and no doubt look beyond that to the prospect of a crossover with the rebooted *Fantastic Four*. Already Quicksilver has been claimed by both sides (and *Kick-Ass*



THE WALL

Taylor-Johnson apparently cast for Disney), while off to one side Warners are scrambling all their DC jets to get a Justice League universe belatedly into the game.

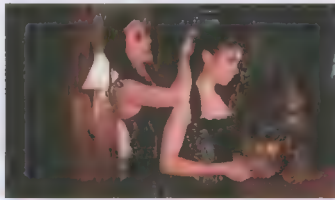
THE WOLVERINE finds itself unhappily caught in the middle of this, having begun as a fairly straight adaptation by Chris McQuarrie for Darren Aronofsky of the classic Claremont-Miller miniseries from 1982, but heavily rewritten since by other hands under James Mangold's direction to bring it into the larger unfolding Singerverse continuity. Like the second *Fantastic Four* and the third *X-Men*, it's one of those films which absolutely cannot fail yet somehow does, a long-awaited mashup of the most beloved of all canon storylines that manages to raise and dash expectations in bewildering alternation. The Japanese locations are wonderful, Hugh Jackman continues to mature agelessly in the role, and the film has the confidence to follow Claremont and Miller in peopling a superhero franchise instalment with non-western characters throughout, aside from a special-guesting Viper and some horribly ill-judged hallucinatory guest spots from what my *Avenue Q*-channelling eldest called "Bad Advice Jean Grey". But the farther it diverges from Claremont's low-key, culturally nuanced plotline of rival codes of honour east and west, to pursue instead big superhero antics like open-heart surgery self-performed with bare hands in the middle of a samurai battle, or duffing up a Silver Samurai reconceived as a bloke



BEYLIUM

in an adamantium Iron Man suit, the nearer the mean it regresses. Galling for a film that bet so heavily on the Asian market, it's now tanked in Japan, which serves them jolly well right for dropping a nuke on Ponyo in the opening set piece – since Nagasaki is curiously impersonated by the picturesque fishing town of Tomonoura, plucked from sleepy obscurity by Miyazaki, and the object of a family pilgrimage in 2011 during a howling gale which at one point deposited part of a vending machine at our feet. We still have it mounted outside the bathroom.

The dimensional doors to the time of monsters were all of course foretold in Pixar's days of glory in the still unsurpassed *Monsters, Inc.*, which miraculously combined thrilling portal-hopping action with an extraordinarily frank dissection of the crisis of American industry and the ethics of milking children's vulnerable emotions for cash, all nucleated around a powerful emotional core of the relationship between a professional terroriser of children and his unbearably cute and vulnerable victim. The challenge for the prequel **MONSTERS UNIVERSITY** is that the original film culminated in a conceptual breakthrough: the revelation that the scare economy on which the entire society and all the characters' lives were founded was a lie, and that making children happy was ten times as effective as traumatising them out of their minds. (Then in their next feature they killed Nemo's mom in the opening



THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS

minutes anyway.) *University* deals with this in the only way it can, by dancing elephant-like around the problem while pretending not to see it. Bizarrely, in a film that's entirely about scaring children, no actual children are scared at any point; instead, all the child-scaring is confined to simulators, and the only live humans scared are fair-game adults, while the vastly expanded cast of monsters are a rainbow coalition of brightly-coloured cartoon adorables that just make you want to collect the whole set.

Meanwhile, the *University* part presents uneasy problems of its own. The film's premise is that Mike and Sully are first thrown together as freshmen scaring majors from opposite backgrounds and strategies: Mike the little Jewish kid from nowhere who works his way up from nothing by sheer determination and effort, and Sully coming from old scare, the effortlessly talented scion of a legendary scaring dynasty who covers his insecurities with jock bravado. When their rivalry gets them thrown off the program, they have to join forces and compete their way back in through one of those campus tournaments that are such a well-known feature of academic life. Yet the film is also anxious to reassure its wider audience base that higher education is not the only pathway to achieving your dreams, and that you don't actually need one of those elitist pieces of paper to become a master of the game so long as you're prepared to do it the Hollywood way instead



THE WORLD'S END

and work your way up from the mailroom. (Just like all those heart surgeons you keep meeting who flunked out of med school and worked their way up from the hospital laundry.) But since the audience already know a degree in scaring to be a certificate of complicity in a vast corporate scam, they could have saved a world of pain by simply studying economics in the first place. Or better still, aperture science.

Much the same plot minus the twist ending is recycled in **PLANES**, the round-the-world aerobic racing adventure "from above the world of *Cars*" that marks the first Pixar derivative in the DisneyToons stable of low-rent spinoff features – mostly to DVD, but occasionally promoted to a theatrical release, used here to showcase the 3D potential of its stunt-flying subject matter. Notoriously unloved by most of the adult market, the *Cars* franchise has been kept on the road by John Lasseter's personal fondness, by the powerhouse strength of its merchandising, and by its popularity with the younger end of Pixar's market at whom this vehicle is squarely aimed. No doubt this explains why so much of the plot, including the hero's central transition from loser to favourite, is fast-forwarded through in montages. Indeed, the actual storyline is such boilerplate that you could pretty much feed a selection of Pixar films into an animated combine harvester and make the film from what comes out of its backside, though here it is in three lines

anyway. Act I: "I am more than just a cropduster!" Act II: "Bolting on a few new parts doesn't change who you are. I can still smell the farm on you." Act III: "You are an inspiration to all of us who want to do more than we were built for!"

Nevertheless, for adult viewers there are unexpected riches beyond the one funny line "French Canadian is the language of love. [beat] In Quebec." The World of *Cars* (which now has its own logo; this one is not going away) remains an eerily evocative one, a mysteriously unpeopled planet inhabited only by sentient machines with no memory or awareness that animal life has ever existed. The animation on *Planes* is outsourced to India, which makes it all the more ironic that in one remarkable sequence Dusty and his exotic Hindu squeeze fly romantically over a completely empty subcontinent to the sounds of A.R. Rahman and culturally sensitive dialogue about sacred farm machinery ("Many believe that we will be recycled as tractors"). Perhaps it's inevitable that the repeatedly-quoted motto of WWII backstory legends the Jolly Wrenches is machine-translated dog-Latin that treats inflection as a middle-class affectation: "*Volo pro veritas* – it means I fly for truth." Maybe in Google; but less answerable riddles crowd around. Who is our hero Dusty in Propwash Junction, Nebraska spraying all those crops for? How is it possible to objectify women's back ends even in the form of aviation models? Who thought an aircraft carrier could be given eyes and a mouth and not creep the hell out of audiences? Why, if Dusty is supposed to represent the little man ("He's become a working-class hero around the globe!"), are both cars and planes are vastly outnumbered by, of all things, forklifts, which surreally do everything from air traffic control to

playing together in mariachi bands? When Disney makes *Pallet Loaders – From Beneath the Notice of the World of Planes and Way Way Off to the Side of the World of Cars*, that's when we'll know they're serious about overthrowing the caste system. Those little guys have dreams too, you know.

A posthuman world is imagined in earnest in Austrian apocalypse fable **THE WALL**, adapted from Marlen Haushofer's resonant 1963 novel: a modern German classic which has never really taken off in translation, perhaps because it's so deeply and uniquely planted in its native Austrian landscape, culture, and climate. Guesting in an Alpine hunting lodge, the nameless narrator wakes up to find herself the last survivor of an apocalyptic event which has instantly killed all human and animal life outside a mysterious force-field enclosing her remote surroundings. Initially it seems the cosiest of catastrophes, as she finds herself amply provided with animal companions and hunting supplies in an idyllic pastoral setting; but gradually the isolation takes its toll and the burden of survival weighs heavier, until a sudden crisis to which the whole narrative has been grimly leading. The film tracks the novel faithfully, simplifying the cast of doomed pets but retaining the ominous framing device of a retrospective report compiled from journals kept along the way, while systematically deleting the sparse details provided in the novel of the heroine's personal backstory and ties, and suppressing speculation about the nature of the catastrophe (in the book presumed to be the detonation of an apocalyptic cold-war weapon) or the limits of the wall and possibilities of escape. Audiences raised in the Anglo-American sf tradition will find it hard to engage with her incuriosity, but that's partly the

point, as the situation overwhelms the problem-solving attitude of can-do masculinity – particularly at the climax, where a possibility left casually unconsidered erupts into the narrative to devastating effect without any inquiry into its antecedents.

A more frontal critique of American sf attitudes comes in Neill Blomkamp's hit-and-miss **ELYSIUM**, which turns the *District 9* man's cool cyborg eye on America's own social apartheid within and across its borders, as Matt Damon's blue-collar victim of the system is Manborged up for a reluctant liberation heist on the off-world gated utopia of the mega-rich who run and feed off the global economic machine that has crushed him. There's no getting away from the fact that every single thing that was brilliant in *District 9* is in various measure less good here: the hero, the villains, the digital monsters, the ghetto locations (present-day Mexico City here mischievously playing future LA), the exosuit action, the media satire, Sharlto Copley, the political edge and feeling for the experience of the dispossessed. But Blomkamp is a thoughtful, conscientious citizen of the world with an obvious love for the American films of Paul Verhoeven, another child of a society at war with evil who sees the US from a liberal base outside (in Blomkamp's case his adopted home of Vancouver); and he deserves credit for resisting the lazy option of going straight to franchise with the serially-postponed *District 10*. Instead, he's made an unmistakably Blomkampian film that seeks to deliver full-on Hollywood blockbuster value while avoiding the easy recourse of open satire – channelling the dark wit that informed *District 9* and early shorts like *Tempbot* and *Tetra Vaal* into his upcoming robocomedy

Chappie instead. It's possible to feel a little disappointed that he hasn't managed to come up with a new plot in four years, but *Elysium* at least has a tidier ending if not necessarily a better one, while the Syd Mead designs for *Elysium* itself are classically beautiful in the grand tradition of sf conceptual art reaching back to 2001. The real problem is that it's an hour and a quarter into the film before our heroes actually make it to *Elysium*, at which point the film we've been twiddling thumbs expecting is rushed through in a fairly by-numbers half-hour in which Matt duly takes out Jodie Foster's Lagarde-channelling Eurovillain and Copley's scary-bearded black-ops nutjob, turns into space Jesus, and reboots the geopolitical system without that pesky inequality, opening borders and extending instant universal healthcare at the touch of a button. Who knew it was that easy?

New YA franchise launchpad **THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS: CITY OF BONES** has avoided the *Percy Jackson* trap by committing to a 2014 sequel even before the first press shows. Critics, who hated the film, are baffled, but it was absolutely the right move. Watch with an audience of adult mundanes and you'll see a completely different film from the one you see in the company of a packed house of first-day teenagers in Camden Town, for whom this is *everything you ever want in a film* – something which (it's important to realise) in no way precludes mass guffawing at the manifold romantic absurdities of dialogue and story. The fanfic alumna who publishes as Cassandra Clare comes of ancient and deeply venerable genre stock as the granddaughter of Max J. Rosenberg of Amicus Productions, the Hit-Girl to Hammer's Kick-Ass in the silver age of British horror cinema;

and if her books themselves don't really punch in the weight class of Riordan or Suzanne Collins, let alone of Rowling or Meyer, what they have absolutely going for them in the crowded YA market is an unrivalled commitment to the kitchen sink. Vampires, werewolves, witches, faerie, demons, angels: all and more are part of a sprawling syncretistic mythology of hereditary "shadow hunters" locked in a forever war with the demon world and its promiscuously interbred mortal seed. Under the direction of Dutch-Norwegian import Harald Zwart, the Canadian-German production has assembled a terrific cast from the dwindling pool of British talent not yet committed to rival franchises, with Lily Collins rather well deployed as teen superwitch Clary, and Jamie Campbell Bower and Robert Sheehan as the vertices of her obligatory love-triangle. The books defer the romantic endgame with a piquantly creepy Luke/Leia thing under which one side of the triangle is alleged to be brother and sister but still share unexpressed yearnings; because this isn't resolved till the third volume, the film has to fob us off for now with them muttering "It doesn't feel like the truth". There's some rather silly new stuff about the *Well-Tempered Clavier* being a system of demon repellent (in part an excuse for the director to tinkle the ivories personally on the soundtrack), and the climax has been heavily reshaped *Percy*-fashion for cinematic payload. But there's a lot to like, it knows its audience, and the correct use of the Latin gerundive puts Disney's robots to shame.

Universes collide as Bilbo, Andromeda, and Scotty take time off from their respective blockbuster franchises to go down the pub and kick bot in **THE WORLD'S END**: a surprisingly

ramshackle and melancholic film about middle age and getting the gang back together years after they were fun, as Simon Pegg's man-child cajoles his former drinking buddies to re-enact a toxic pub crawl from their teens, only to find that everyone they remember has been replaced by machine simulations. The film is if anything the more effective for not being terribly funny, the tumbleweeding failed zingers ("You said you wanted to catch up and chew the fat; I think you just wanted to drink it") only enhancing the feeling of trying in vain to revive the feeling of those lost days of youth before *FAQ about Time Travel* and *Grabbers* when *Shaun*like lock-in apocalypse comedies were new and fresh. But slowly it comes together in a strange, mad, and unexpectedly resonant finale about the right to resist the call to grow up as a civilisation. "There's a vast community of worlds up there living together peacefully, cooperatively, and they want us to join them"; but in the end Earth chooses to regress to the dawn of civilisation rather than submit to childhood's end, just as Edgar Wright put *Ant-Man* on hold to make this silly but affecting elegy for a lost suburban youth when pubs were community hubs, alcohol poisoning was cool, and sf dreams could still come true. "That was supposed to be the beginning of my life, that promise and optimism, that feeling I was going to take on the whole universe." In the film, of course he does, while the writers now find themselves key figures in the Abrams and Marvel universes respectively. But in a season of monsters and mecha, it's a refreshing reminder that riding around in giant battle machines isn't the only kind of fun to be had, and the British way to see alien invasions off is with a sustained counter-bombardment of beer and swearing.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

DEFIANCE

THE HOST

BLANCANIEVES

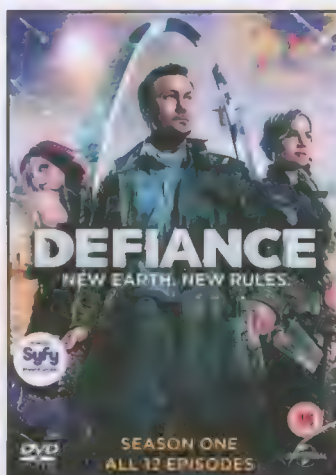
PI

OBLIVION

SPACE BATTLESHIP
YAMATO

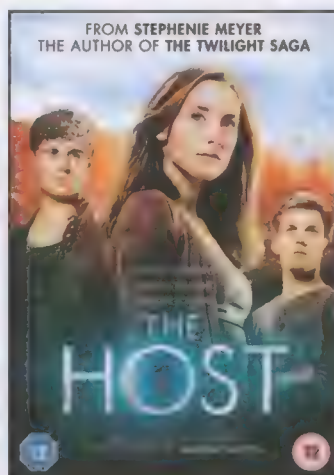
OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN

THE FOUR



Seeing as how conflict is essential for TV drama, many futuristic sci-fi series that manage to avoid copying superhero templates (like *Alphas*) or warfare (*BSG*, *Falling Skies*) borrow their typically uninspired set-ups from cop shows (*Continuum*, *Alien Nation*, *Space Precinct*) or westerns (*Earth 2*, *Firefly*, *Terra Nova*). **DEFIANCE** Season One (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 July) is, sadly, no exception to this unwritten rule of reformatting, and the generic familiarity of a cowboy/cop scenario makes it predictable and often tiresomely dull viewing. With many blithely placed anachronisms – in both typically scavenged production design (much is ridiculously unlikely in the ruins of a scorched world), and ethnic/American cultural references – we can imagine brainstorming in production offices has intravenous-coffee powering back-up plot-generators working overtime. Yes, mixed metaphors are de rigueur.

Centred on a post-holocaust/alien-occupied St Louis, ex-marine Nolan (Grant Bowler, zombie flick *Remains*) rides into town with adopted daughter/alien psychic Irisa (Stephanie Leonidas, Dave McKean's *MirrorMask*) and promptly demonstrates his mettle as the new streetwise lawman.



Buffy and *Angel* alumni Julie Benz plays the mayor, whose sister Kenya (Mia Kirshner, *Exotica*, assassin 'Mandy' in 24) runs the local brothel/bar. British exports Jaime Murray (a female H.G. Wells in *Warehouse 13*) and Tony Curran (*Underworld Evolution*, the invisible man in *LXG*) play chiefs of albino-like aliens, all quasi-religious nut-jobs. Graham Greene (*Thunderheart*) is a crusty patriarch of the McCawley clan and the leader of local mineworkers.

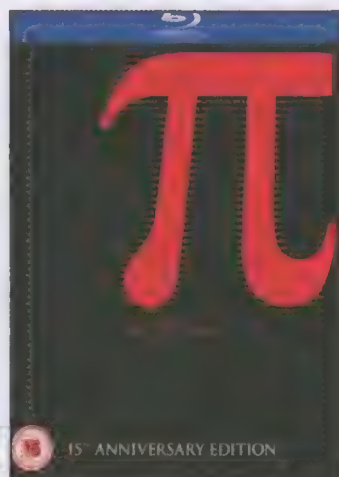
The vivid spectacle of a mechanised assault by alien monsters forms the climax of the movie-length pilot episode, but rather too much of the inconsistent dialogue in action scenes is laced with dumbly colloquial clichés. While some oddments of hi-tech gadgetry make a contrast to the homespun philosophies of pioneering spirits, variably honest residents in this last bastion of libertarian society attempt to stand firm, if not often united, against the apparently corrupt rulers of 'Earth Republic'; and the script-editor's frontier-myths browser always warns us before closing multiple tabs.

As a Syfy original, it's like *StarGate* but lacking any portal tourism, and the *V* remake without a moment's peace. Lively *Mad Max-*



oid action erupts between archaic wedding customs and a cold-case murder mystery, sketched uncomfortably alongside *Caprica* style political intrigue. Grisly creature imports from the likes of *Cowboys & Aliens* and *Slither* account, in part, for episode three's body-horror. Drug dealing/gun smuggling plots furnish a sleazy crime spree for Nolan to solve, and he's a savvy enough detective but perhaps a little too smart for a seasoned ex-soldier. Stagecoach robbers, outlaws and a bounty hunter come visiting while other routine stories form the bulk of episodes, but there's a 'razor rain' storm of orbital junk: cue the disruptive special effects that conclude with a crash-landing of ark-ship debris. Plague comes to Defiance and prompts chanting rituals. Oi! Keep it down, will ya? People are trying to think rationally about finding a cure. The writer has obviously seen/read *Damnation Alley* and knows how to put a TV-hero grade spin on it.

The mayoral election campaign is run by liars, of course, and – much feared by Defiance's residents – there's an invasion by E-Rep forces with an inhumanly sinister agenda, so the township becomes like a sci-fi play-set, albeit of a Lego deluxe variety.



Another season is in the works.

If teenage Melanie was the only girl in the world... The voices made her do it. Andrew Niccol's **THE HOST** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 July) plays like an odd metaphor of suspended adolescence; a tantrum of reluctance to join the adult world of social responsibilities, where juvenile romanticism is given up as a change for the better. It explores surface-deep schizoid confusions of glandular drives in conflict with a nagging conscience but it is cursed by a plot of timid metaphysics without any food for thought (the moral of this story is that alien parasites are people too, and they are just so happy to be alive!) and even less substance than cheaply spun candy floss.

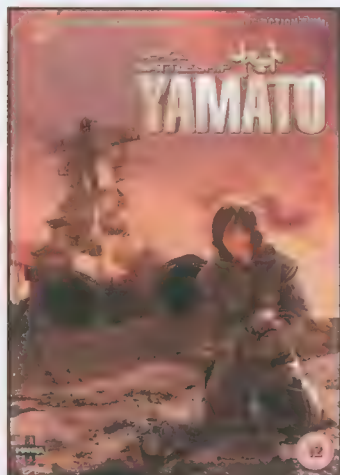
Fred Pohl's classic SF-horror *We Purchased People* accomplished something a lot more intriguing and infinitely chilling with a similar body-snatchers premise. This is mostly a terrible yawn-fest, even for a futuristic road movie as obsessive cop Seeker (Diane Kruger in a role that screams for Charlize Theron) chases down the rebellious Wanda (alias Wanderer), portrayed by the genre's new It-girl Saoirse Ronan (*Lovely Bones*, *Hanna*, *Byzantium*, soon to be seen in Ryan Gosling's directing



debut *How to Catch a Monster*), ignoring fervent wishes/stroppy attitudes of her own human host to explore the merits of humanity, albeit with far less gravitas than Jeff Bridges did in *Starman*.

Apart from shiny hardware and some idyllic imagery of the human resistance's hideaway in desert caves, this remains a flavourless tease with a soppy and practically brainless rom-com affect that is actually worse at playing out virtual soul-mate games than a movie which attempts to blend *Twilight* and *The Matrix* should have been.

The thing about exercising total creative control is that it can so easily go off the rails and crash, no matter whose hand is on the steering wheel. In the world of movies, full creative control can be just as much a burden for directors as the freedoms implied by an unlimited choice would be for musicians (a three-piece band or full orchestra?) or painters (all those colours to pick from!). The sensible decision for artists is to limit themselves, even if it means imposing artificial constraints upon their own creativity. However, as we found with the Dogme manifesto, such self-limiting options may lead to a disastrously misguided effort, not just like playing wrong



notes in a concerto, but like shooting the piano player. For cinema in the 21st century, shooting in black-and-white is nothing more than an empty headed affectation by vanity artists, people who seem to believe that every single one of their vaguest dreams are really worth sharing with the world. They tend to act more like devoutly religious types wearing silly hats.

Pablo Berger's b&w feature **BLANCANIEVES** (collector's edition DVD, 5 August) is a case in point. A Spanish version of *Snow White*, with bullfighting, this is made as silent cinema, perhaps in response to the unfathomable success of Hazanavicius' *The Artist*. I found *Blancanieves* far too gruelling to watch because such blatantly phony artistic simulations have a tendency to reject emotional involvement. Simply ignoring the fact that it is a 21st century production mimicking aspects of obsolete/antiquated technology (could anyone still enjoy listening to 79 rpm recorded music on a wind-up gramophone?) is not a viable choice, so it quickly becomes impossible to overlook the ridiculous *frame* around this colourless picture. Is there something *wrong* about the use of synchronous sound for



screen dialogue? It is the absolute minimum standard! Anything else is just a ludicrous pretension and likely to be a commercial failure. OK, making money should not be the only reason to create movies, but arty directors such as Berger should realise that creative success means getting the balance right between imagination concerns and product that is a worthwhile movie. Unfortunately, *Blancanieves* feels too much like a Luddite-minded project.

The last director to actually get away aesthetically with using b&w for a feature production was David Lynch, in 1980, when he filmed *The Elephant Man*. The period setting of that peculiar biopic melodrama suited b&w almost perfectly. It followed on from Lynch's first triumph, *Eraserhead*, a genuine cult picture that arguably could only have been made in b&w because it depicts a vividly nightmarish realm that lacks any sense of colour. Colour in *Eraserhead*'s world would be too obnoxious. Elsewhere though, Coppola's more earthly *Rumble Fish* (1983) failed on so many levels because its particular worldview was not, in all honesty, a b&w one.

Like Coppola's nostalgic drama of gangs, Darren Aronofsky's



debut feature **PI** (15th anniversary edition Blu-ray, 12 August) is not artistically valid because there is nothing in its complexity of narrative or heavyweight genre themes to suggest that it's about a starkly monochrome world, so the movie's lack of colour makes no sense. It is simply another silly-hat belief in the validity of art house production. Reclusive maths genius Max is in erratic pursuit of a 200+ digit number that may hold the key to a full understanding of everything in the universe – at least from a human-scale perspective of predicting ups and downs on the New York stock exchange. Then it gets all fuzzy...

For a story that's based in the precision world of mathematics, the often grainy obfuscations of *Pi* appear in marked contrast to the greater clarity of vision granted to Ron Howard's excellent biographical drama *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). Essentially, *Pi* is just a hacker thriller emerging from the loosely avant-garde fringes of cyberpunk. It gains nothing of any value by being shot in b&w. Despite its rhythmic editing patterns that became Aronofsky's trademark (or annoying tic) in later movies, *Pi* lacks any of the deeply engrossing/truly disturbing aspects of Lynch's early efforts. In

the end, Ken Russell's magnificent *Altered States* remains a superior treatment of like-minded SF tropes (about an obsessive scientist in search of 'ultimate truth'), not least because it used colour – and sound! – to such a stunning effect.

Tom Cruise. I hate him! His unfunny brand of narcissism blights Hollywood stardom. His cringe-worthy acting is an industrial accident that keeps repeating itself, bringing many genre movies into disrepute with his unseemly posturing and complete lack of a screen presence. He's arguably the least charismatic and most boring of the fêted elite, as even Will Smith can occasionally make us laugh with bluffer's guide antics in *MIB* pictures when he's not taking himself too seriously. Cruise is always serious, although his po-faced attitude is a dead-eyed giveaway, isn't it? From spy-fi mishaps (of action-packed formulas misapplied to *Mission: Impossible* franchising), to a lazily conceived philidickian farce in *Minority Report*, haughtily overpaid Cruise is a drive-by hit-man, idly shattering the shop window displays of urban futurism/philosophical humanism with his vacuous mayhem and a patented smirk. Cruise was also Spielberg's guileless conspirator for sabotaging Wells' legacy in that utterly charmless *War of the Worlds* remake. Most galling of all is that he continues to win lead roles in megabuck thrillers that always mar, and often ruin, studio output of big sci-fi adventures, and 'Big Sci-fi' is already like the commercially unethical disasteroid fracking of genre resources.

OBLIVION (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 August) remains clear of the critical blast radius centred on that veritable Chernobyl of SF cinema, Roger Christian's millennial opus *Battlefield Earth* (fronted by John

Travolta – another adherent of Hubbard's malign scientology), but a clutch of telltale similarities are evident in its thematic blandness and outrageously clumsy blending of skiffy borrowings and upgrades from arch pulp traditions. Welcome to Cruise's greatest hits compilation movie. As the heroic Jack, a drone-repair tech, he pilots a super-copter aircraft (a new model Cruise-mobile, this aerial condom riffs on the symbolism of his jet-jockey's phallus in *Top Gun*), rides a cool motorbike (meh, see *M:I 2*), copes with dangerous weaponry (*WotW* remake), shatters a grand conspiracy (*Minority Report*), and finally unmasks the secret of his own buried past (*Vanilla Sky*). Poor Andrea Riseborough (borderline SF *Resistance*) is wholly miscast as Jack's team-mate Victoria, but she chides him, most accurately, with "the last thing we need is you putting it all at risk" – and yet that is exactly what Cruise does. He pursues (admittedly bogus) danger on screen, just like an adrenaline junkie. That's all he does. He can't be bargained with. He can't be reasoned with. The Cruise mechanism doesn't feel humility, shame or regret. And he absolutely will not stop until our genre is left devoid of any genuine human meanings. Facing danger in movies without feeling any fear whatsoever is not heroic, it's boring. Schwarzenegger got away with it for years because he boasted a massive screen presence. Diminutive Cruise could never match the cartoonish Arnie's blustering one-liners, never mind his muscle-bound swagger.

Cruise's brand of empty slickness just eats away like a terminal cancer, at ideas and cautionary significance that SF movies do so well, while he aimlessly cheapens SF dramas, and sucks the life from all of those around him, at every opportunity, in every scene

that he's in (ah, yes, like *Interview with a Vampire*). In the supposedly pivotal sequence of *Oblivion* where Jack is fighting his double, it is hard to know who to root for and, ultimately, impossible to care who wins. *Oblivion* might be well worth seeing because it features many spectacular effects, and the designers have obviously mined images from decades of inspirational SF art. Unlikely as it too often seems, the movie is likeable for that much at least. Cruise is best viewed as the annoying little dog that runs around the futuristic house and jumps on the shiny new furniture.

A live-action version of classic anime, **SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 August) is set in the year 2199 and it concerns an alien invasion that wipes out Earth's defences with meteorite bombardments, leaving the planet an irradiated hell. The last hope is tech aid from another galaxy, and so a Japanese WW2 flagship is refitted with warp-speed engines, plus handy super-weapon, and their mission is to save humanity from extinction. No pressure though...

Captain Otika is an old naval crusty who passes on his command to young hero Kodai, but it is ace pilot/feminist Yuki who becomes the pivotal stereotype. Although this was obviously prompted by the *BSG* remake, it's important to remember that the animated *SBY* was a clear influence upon the original *BSG* anyway, so this remake is merely closing a transpacific circle of genre borrowings that spans four decades.

Director Takashi Yamazaki made underrated noir-styled time-travel actioner *Returner*, and this repeats the formulaic mix of melancholic or excitable characters in a juvenile pulp of nonetheless largely serious-toned sci-fi adven-

ture, about suffering loss and gaining maturity throughout cheaply effective, spectacular visuals. As usual, the grand finale sinks into typically overblown Asian sentiment, but there is sufficient entertainment and genuine fun along the way to make this movie well worth tracking down for your next space opera fix.

While America's number one super-cop John McClane flew into Russia for unofficial gang-busting action – with his secret-agent son – in extravagant nuclear caper *A Good Day to Die Hard*, and Jack Bauer struggles to regain his regular TV job working all manner of antisocial hours in *24*, newcomer Mike Banning steps into the hero game – almost single-handedly winning the day, the battle, and the war against terrorism – in Antoine Fuqua's cliché-packed yet hugely entertaining **OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 August). The home invasion movie just went all the way to the top. This makes a gripping drama out of an international crisis, with Secret Service agent Mike (Gerard Butler, fast becoming a busy superstar with the likes of *Dracula 2001*, *Reign of Fire*, *Timeline*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Beowulf & Grendel*, *300*, *Gamer*, and the updated Shakespeare of *Coriolanus* peppering his uneven genre CV) abandoning his desk-job to rescue the president (Aaron Eckhart) from Korean baddies. Apparently it faces competition from Roland Emmerich's cypocatic siege *White House Down* (which I have not seen), but Fuqua's version of this perhaps long-overdue high-concept story offers plenty of slickly choreographed shoot 'em up sequences to be going along with, and there's enough gadget-conscious weaponry on display to compare with the recent James Bond adventures. Not since John Woo's comic book styled *Broken*

Arrow have so many helicopters crashed spectacularly on screen instead of just off screen (as was the usual practise for decades of stunts before CGI and mega-budgets made anything possible). If you are in the right mood for the brutish appeal that gung-ho Butler does so well, this makes for satisfying viewing in the often-quite-brainless fun category.

Based on a novel, not a manga/anime, Gordon Chan's martial arts fantasy **THE FOUR** (DVD, 9 September) begins as the big city cops of Lord Liu's Department Six discover that secret agents of Divine Constabulary are operating in the capital and, apparently, with a royal mandate. The Constabulary team leader/mentor Zhuge (the always great Anthony Wong) is intent upon breaking a counterfeiting conspiracy and exposing the mastermind behind it. Zhuge's confrontation with Liu creates problems for everyone concerned, but eventually sanity prevails and the spies get along with the police well enough to stamp out evil.

The followers of mage-like guru Zhuge include a crippled but capable psychic/analyst, Emotionless (Liu Yi-fei, *The Assassins*), who detects the powers of any other martial artists, and she also demos telekinetic fu. With her help, Zhuge recruits some new masters for the Constabulary: reluctant hero Cold-Blood and expert tracker Life Snatcher. Existing team-mate Iron Hands maintains contacts in the underworld (just a criminal fraternity, not something genuinely occult), aiding the constables' mission and subsequent

unofficial investigations.

A ferocious yet uneven pace is balanced by charmingly comedic sketches, and a number of philosophical undertones, heightening action scenes of comic book super-powers that have considerable zest. It has *Matrix* bullet-time on steroids that cinema from Asia often does very well, and *The Four* benefits from numerous time changes/speed ramping and swooping/soaring camera work. This is actually the first Chinese production to make use of the flying-on-wires spider-cam.

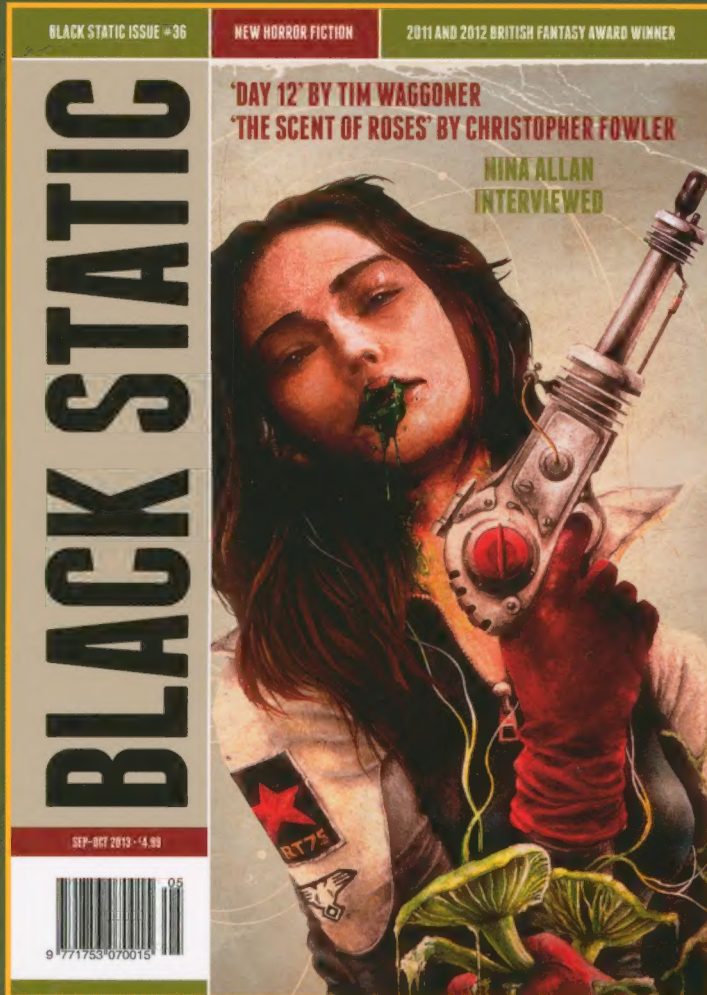
Secondary characters – named Avalanche, Butterfly, Ding Dong, and Big Wolf – eagerly embody the caché of a historical Chinese version of the X-Men. And, despite this movie's exotic milieu, it's best viewed as a fantasy drama centred on an extended family of elite otherness, fighting to preserve justice in an increasingly corrupt realm, where the finale's clutch of zombies are made of dust and ice. The chief villain (in his royal red outfit) exudes smiley/laughing menace while skilfully avoiding campiness.

Its neatest cross-genre trick is that this is not a plain-clothes superhero movie, because the costume drama aspect permits each character to exhibit individual looks and styles. As in the convoluted political weather patterns of Marvel comics, there's a lot going on here (including a love triangle), but its scenario is complex and evocative without becoming overly sentimental or too melancholy. Fans of *Zu Warriors* and the *Storm Riders* trilogy will probably enjoy this.

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